JOHN CREASEY

Meet The Baron

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from back cover

John Manering (aka The Baron) makes his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both . . . . Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with The Baron. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . . . .

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CHAPTER ONE

A CAUSE

LADY MARY OVERNDON TICKLED THE END OF HER LONG AND patrician nose with a tortoiseshell lorgnette that was as old-fashioned as her bun-shaped coiffure. Thirty years before her long grey dress, with its flounces and its trimmings of fur and beads and its stiffened collar of fine muslin, might have been in the height of fashion; in this year of grace the only thing about Lady Mary in the height of fashion was her mind, and few were privileged to know much of its workings.

Colonel George Belton, her companion in the sunlit room overlooking the lawn and tennis-courts of Overndon Manor, studied her, and smiled to himself. She looked an arrogant old shrew — hard, embittered, and self-centred, as though sixty years in a fast-changing world had proved too much for her.

The Cornel laughed suddenly. Lady Mary looked at him, as he knew she would, and her grey eyes were sparkling. A man or woman of understanding had but to look into her deep grey eyes to know that her thin lips and pointed chin were lying. Her eyes bespoke humour and understanding. So did her voice — a rather slow, low voice.

"What's the matter with you now, George?" she asked.

The Colonel smiled behind his bushy white moustache.

"I was thinking," he said, "that, of all the men who've met you because of Marie, Mannering's the only one who's not been scared away. There are possibilities about that man, Mary."

"I don't think so, George, where Marie is concerned."

Colonel Belton was surprised, and a little disappointed. He liked Mannering, he loved Lady Mary's daughter, and he adored Lady Mary herself. His knowledge of the women, built up during the five years that he had been the Overndons' next-door

neighbour, had told him that John Mannering would make an admirable husband for Marie and an excellent son-in-law for Mary. True, none of them knew more than that Mannering was young — well, youngish: thirty-five, perhaps — handsome enough, apparently rich enough, and a member of a family as respected as the Overndons. But the Colonel had built for himself a pleasant little fairy-story with a happy ending. Marie was twenty-two, and the Colonel was old-fashioned enough to believe in early marriages for women. So he scowled, and demanded an explanation.

Lady Mary regarded the two people who had just left the tennis-court and were moving across the lawn towards the Manor. The Colonel whistled to himself, tor he knew that Lady Mary was sad, and for the life of him he couldn't guess why.

"They make a handsome pair, don't they?" he demanded doggedly. "What's the matter with Mannering? This is the first time you've ever suggested anything against him. Damn it, and I . . ."

"George," said Lady Mary gently, "you talk too much."

There were some things that Colonel Belton took hardly, even from Lady Mary. He frowned, pursed his lips, and sulked.

Mannering, dressed in white flannels that were vivid against the sunlit green of the lawn, walked easily and carried his seventy-two inches well. Lady Mary could see him smiling as he talked to Marie, who hardly reached his shoulder. His face was tanned to the intriguing degree of brown that could make even a plain man distinguished, but he would have been presentable without that. Marie Overndon was small, dainty, and lovely. Her wide grey eyes, suggestive of her mother's, looked out on the world with confessed enjoyment; she was *alive.* Slim, straight, and supple, she carried herself with easy grace as she walked with Mannering towards the house.i

They were within twenty yards when a "hallo" came from the end of the garden, and a man and a woman hurried through a

wicket-gate, brandishing tennis-rackets and shouting as they came.

The Colonel scowled as the couple on the lawn turned to meet the newcomers. He continued to scowl as the four went to the tennis-court for a pre-arranged set and were lost to sight, hidden by a thick shrubbery. He took a pipe from his pocket and began to fill it with tobacco from a leather pouch. Not until the first puff did his face clear, and at the same moment Lady Mary laughed.

"What's the matter with *you?"* demanded the Colonel explosively. "Damn it, Mary — why the blazes don't you make up your mind and marry me?"

"So that you can put in more time at your club?"

"Bah!" said the Colonel.

"I'll marry you," said Lady Overndon, "when Marie's married. Not before."

"She's a born spinster," snapped the Colonel, "and you do your damnedest every time a likely fellow comes along to make him realise it, Mannering's a bit old, perhaps, as today's youth goes, but that's almost an advantage; and they're well matched, aren't they? And they're as much in love with each other as — as . . ."

"You with me?" suggested Lady Mary.

"There are times," said the Colonel, "when I could bowstring you! Be fair, Mary. What's Mannering done to upset you?"

Lady Mary used her lorgnette to scare a persistent fly from her small ear.

"Nothing," she said, during the operation. "I like Mannering, George, and I can't think of anyone I'd like better — for Marie, of course."

"Then — then what the deuce are you driving at?"

"Shhh!" said Lady Overndon. "It's hot, and you'll get apoplexy — and burying you might be even more painful than marrying you. George, Mannering had a talk with me this morning.

"About Marie?"

“About Marie — and other things. He told me that he’s worth a bare thousand a year. No more, no less.”

The Colonel’s pipe dropped to the carpet, and the start of his outburst was spoiled somewhat by his hasty recovery of the brier. He was positively bristling as he spoke.

“A — a thousand ? Damn it, Mary, I thought he was — his father was rolling in it, wasn’t he?”

“His father didn’t gamble on the turf or off it.”

“And Mannering — Mannering’s *lost* his money?”

“Most of it.”

“Gambling? Horses?”

“George,” said Lady Mary severely, “there are times when I think you’ll get old long before your time. Yes, John Mannering lost most of his money. Not quite in the usual way; slow horses, yes, but not women. Or, at least, he says not and I believe him. Five years ago he reached his safety-line, left himself with capital enough to bring in a thousand a year, and retired into Somerset, where he plays cricket, rides when he can, reads a great deal, and is happy. He has a seven-roomed bungalow, one servant, two acres of land, and two horses. I’m telling you in his own words.”

The Colonel was breathing hard and scowling.

“He — he told you all this, and you — you told him to . . .”

“Are you reminding me I’m a Victorian mother, George? I didn’t tell him to go back to his bungalow; you ought to know me better.”

Colonel Belton heaved a great sigh, and smiled at last.

“Sorry, m’dear. I couldn’t see you in the part. Yet — you say there’ll be no marriage? Money isn’t so important. It’s a love-match, and quite a lot of people can live on a thousand a year, or so I’ve heard. He could give up things — one of the horses,” added the Colonel, as a man inspired

“I suppose a wife *would* be worth even that sacrifice,” said

Lady Mary gently. “Well, now you know as much as I do, George. And I don’t think they’ll marry.”

“But that makes Marie a regular little — dammit — gold-digger !”

“Call it the wisdom of her age,” said Lady Mary. “I think I’m glad. Mannering and money could make her happy, but Mannering without it couldn’t I may be wrong, of course, but we’ll see.”

“My opinion,” said George Belton, a little bewildered, “is that you’re talking through your hat, m’dear.”

“And I’ve already said more than the modern hat could possibly cover,” said Lady Mary. “Let’s find some tea.”

Marie Overndon stood beneath the spreading branches of the oaks that bordered the lake in the Manor grounds and stared across the moonlit stretch of water. The moon shone on her, giving her a cold beauty that Mannering saw as if he were looking at something a long way off. She was very slim and straight, and she was motionless. Once Mannering moved, cracking a twig beneath his shoe. A light wind played with the leaves and the grass and the water, disturbing even Marie’s golden hair. But her lips, set tightly and more thinly than Mannering had ever seen them, did not move; nor did her eyes. The frigidity of her beauty, after its warmth of that afternoon, after those half-promises by look and gesture, spread to the man. The smile that had curved his lips, the gleam in his eyes, was gone. Understanding filled him.

“Well,” he said, after a silence that had seemed eternal, “you know everything, Marie. One thousand a year, one sizeable bungalow, all the love I can give you. Marie . . .”

He stepped forward, but the look in her eyes stopped him. He stood dead-still, a yard from her.

“Why didn’t you tell me this a month ago?”

“I hardly knew you. I didn’t dream that I’d fall in love with you. It’s not” — his lips curved, and the gleam in his hazel eyes

brightened his face for a moment, but was soon gone — “it’s not a habit, Marie. In fact, it’s the first time I’ve ever proposed.”

“Is it?” She turned away from the lake, and away from Mannering, neither seeing nor caring for the look in his eyes. “I hope it won’t be the last, John. Now let’s forget it. I’m chilly, and we’d better get back.”

She had walked fifty yards before Mannering started to follow her. For a moment misery had lurked in his eyes, and he had stared after her, watching her disappear into the gloom of the September evening, fighting against himself, against the impulse to plead with her, to beg of her. And then the coldness of her beauty chilled him, even in retrospect, and he remembered the way in which her expression had altered as he had told her the story that earlier in the day he had told her mother. The thought fought with his memory of the past month, the nearness of her, the promise. He could remember with startling clarity the ripple of her laughter, the curving of her red lips, the fire in her grey eyes. God, what a fool he was! Not for a moment had he doubted her. When Lady Mary had said, that morning, “Try, John — you’ve my blessing,” he had told himself the battle was won. It hadn’t occurred to him that Marie would say no.

The muscles of his face moved, and his hands clenched at his sides. And then he swung round, with a bitter humour in his eyes, but a humour for all that.

“If I’d nine thousand a year more,” he mused, “I might have married her. Wild oats have their uses. Oi, Marie!” he called out, hearing her walking through the woods bordering the lake, but unable to see her.

“Yes?” Her voice was cold and clear, and she stopped moving.

“Better wait for me,” he said, making for a glimpse of white through the darkness, “or they’ll call this a lovers’ quarrel.”

He chuckled to himself as she moved again abruptly, and

chuckled more when he realised she was hurrying back to the Manor. He followed, more leisurely, until he reached the lawn. Then the ghost of her laughter that afternoon mocked at him. He swung away, savagely, bitterly, blindly.

On the following morning the Colonel arrived late at the breakfast-table, to find Marie alone and on the point of finishing her meal. There was no sign of Mannering, and Marie did not mention his name. He waited impatiently until Lady Mary arrived and Marie had gone — where, no one knew. But even then the Colonel did not get his question out, for Lady Mary saw it in his eyes.

"He caught the morning train to town," she said quietly. "I knew it, George. Marie's money-mad. She always has been. And she's selfish. . . . Don't stand gaping there, man ! Sit down and light your pipe, and try to think of a millionaire whose waist-measurement isn't more than forty-six and who . . ."

"Steady, m'dear, steady!" warned the Colonel.

"If I can't let off steam with my prospective husband," snapped Lady Mary, "what am I marrying him for? Give me a cigarette, or fetch me a drink, or slap my face . . . . Oh, George, you *are* a fool! Or am I ? I don't know. But she broke something in Mannering — I know, I saw it this morning: in his eyes, on his lips. Oh, he *took* it all right — on top, but only on top."

The Colonel grew suddenly wise. He slipped his arm round his lady's shoulders and let her cry.

CHAPTER TWO

SOME EFFECTS

"ALL THIS," GRUMBLED JIMMY RANDALL — SOMETIMES KNOWN as the Hon. James Randall, of Mortimer Hall, Yampton, Somerset, and 18 Dowden Square, London, W.1, "dates from the time you were with the Overndons, and two and two make four. No woman's worth it."

"Ah!" said John Mannering, smiling.

"Ah, yourself!" snapped Randall. "You've run through fifteen thousand pounds in the past twelve months . . ."

"Where did you get that information from?" demanded Mannering quickly.

Randall laughed, and left his chair in front of the log-fire. The two men had been talking for half an hour on the subject of Mannering's activities during the past year. Randall had been pleading, angry and disgusted in turn, but until that moment Mannering had displayed a faint amusement, punctured with a cynicism or an occasional "Ah!" The mention of the money quickened his interest. Randall decided that achievement alone merited a drink, and he was smiling as he poured it.

Mannering sniffed the brandy, gazing thoughtfully at his friend as he cupped the glass.

"Good stuff," he admitted. "But who told you of the fifteen thousand, Jimmy ?"

Randall sipped and inhaled the brandy, and then scowled at Mannering's question — but he discussed the brandy first.

"Not so good as the Denie Mourice '75, and I've bought two cases, drat it. Toby Plender told me."

"H'm," murmured Mannering, holding his glass away from him and flicking it with his forefinger. "So you held a post-mortem before reading the Riot Act, did you?"

“Stop using that glass like a tuning-fork,” said Randall irritably. “Yes, we held a post-mortem, if you want it like that. You’re like a kid acting the goat . . .”

“Well said!” Mannering laughed. “You’ll go a long way before you crack a better one than that.”

Randall didn’t smile.

“That’s right, be bright. I’m telling you . . .”

“For the sixth time!”

“That you’re making a fool of yourself, and that all of Somerset and half of London is sharing the joke. Damn it, John — even the Continental’s taking you up. I was there last night . . .”

“Low music hall,” said Mannering sadly, “reflecting low taste. How did they work me in?”

“Mimi Rayford came on,” said Randall, with a sudden grin, “and the dummy in the stalls bellowed, “Mannering’s latest”. I . . .”

Mannering laughed, until the brandy spilt over the edge of his glass. Randall’s grin widened reluctantly.

“It *was* good,” he admitted.

“It was wrong,” said Mannering, recovering himself. “Mimi and I quarrelled two nights ago, and she had a smack at me. Never expect a fair dividend from a woman, Jimmy, however much you invest in her.”

Randall’s scowl came back.

“I haven’t seen the paper to-day,” he said, “but the gossip-columns will have it all right,” He looked hard at his friend, at those hazel eyes which could be humorous, lazy, quizzical, and mischievous in turn, but were now sardonic. “Why not drop it, John ? You had a bad break, I know, but not bad enough to — to squander every darned penny you’ve got on a crowd of gold-diggers.”

“That phrase went out with the flood,” said Mannering. “So because I told you and Toby Plender I was worth twenty thousand

some time ago, you both think I'm approaching my limit, and you exhume me and read the Riot Act."

"It is a tiling that worries us both a darned sight more than you seem to understand," said Randall, with real seriousness. Damn it, neither Toby nor I *want* to see you go under."

Mannering's eyes twinkled, and he nodded.

"I know," he said, "but what can you do with a man who's tried the cure and found it doesn't take ? You'll only worry yourselves grey . . ."

"About you ?" asked Randall coldly.

"Oh, no. About the failure of your efforts to put me on the right path. And that reminds me, Jimmy, you've forgotten the racing and the boxing . . ."

"Forgotten nothing," snapped Randall. "The only thing you haven't sunk your money on during this last year is beer . . ."

"Make it alcohol in general," murmured Mannering.

"And when you're down to your last pound or so," said Randall, "you'll start that. For the last time — will you drop it?"

There was silence for a moment. Mannering's eyes held his friend's. He had known Randall for twenty years, through the hot enthusiasm of school-days, the *blast* years of Cambridge, the recklessness that had followed, and the calmer days of the past five years. He understood Randall; he understood the other member of the trio of friends, Toby Plender, who was also in London; but he did not understand himself, as he answered slowly: "No, Jimmy. Sorry. I've set my course, and I'll stick to it. If I'm blown off it" — he shrugged his shoulders and grinned, that old, cheerful grin — "I'll find another."

"You're a fool," said Randall.

"We'll celebrate a mutual understanding in a spot more brandy," said Mannering.

Although he left Randall on that inconsequential note, Mannering was by no means pleased to learn that his friends were taking so close an interest in him. He felt that he wanted to do exactly as he liked, and the thought of interference annoyed him. On the other hand, he had the good sense to realise that neither Randall nor Plender would act — or talk — without the best of motives, and he did not propose to allow the affair to affect a friendship that had weathered many storms.

If his feeling of irritation left him as he walked towards the City — and Plender's office — he did not intend to let Plender get away with the thing without some protest. True, it could hardly be called a breach of confidence that the solicitor had told Randall how low Mannering's finances were, for the three of them had known for a long time most that there was to know about one another, while Plender could say to Randall things that he could say to no other man on earth.

He reached the solicitor's office, and was taken to the junior partner's room immediately. As the door closed, and before he sat down, he smiled sardonically at his friend.

"I'd like to know," he said, with a show of annoyance not altogether discounted by the smile in his eyes, "whether you call yourself a solicitor or a talking parrot ? I suppose you didn't tell Mimi Rayford that I was down to my last five thousand, did you ?"

"Never heard of Mimi Rayford," said Toby Plender equably.

"Nor Jimmy Randall ?"

"That," said Toby, pressing the tips of his fingers together, "was between friends." He grinned, and pushed a box of cigarettes across the desk. "Well, what's your trouble?"

"I'm going to change my solicitor," said Mannering, put ting his hat and stick on the desk and clearing a corner for his feet. "Mind if I sit down ?"

Plender surveyed the size-ten shoes resting on his desk, shifted

his gaze to Mannering's quizzing eyes, and grinned.

"So you're rattled enough to think of changing your solicitor?"

"Rattled, no. Careful, yes," said Mannering. "And when I say change I mean cancel out entirely. Solicitors seem to me too solicitous."

"H'm," said Plender, "h'm. So you're taking the last five thousand, are you ?"

"Yes, and putting it in a bank. It's nice to feel you have my welfare at heart, Toby, but it's a strain being the victim of good intentions."

"I thought it would do it," said Plender, half to himself. He was a small man, faultlessly dressed, with a hooked nose, a Punch of a chin, and a pair of disconcertingly direct grey eyes. At thirty-five Toby Plender had a reputation for being the smartest criminal lawyer in London, and he coupled this with the fact that he was nearly bald. His humour was dry when it was not caustic, and he shared with Jimmy Randall a regard for John Mannering and a growing concern for their friend's recent activities.

"You thought it would do what?" asked Mannering.

"Make you think," said Plender. "It's time you did, John; time you thought hard, and stopped chucking away your cash."

"D'you know," said Mannering, "you and Jimmy should sing duets together — you both harp so on ancient ditties. Toby

Plender's eyes were hard; he was taking this thing seriously, and Mannering's flippancy annoyed him.

"Well?"

"Don't try to reform me. I've had the itch for gambling since I was so high, and it's been part of my make-up all the time, even though I kept it down for a while. So . . ."

"Supposing she'd married you ?" asked Plender.

"Supposing the dead could speak? They can't. She didn't. Have I made myself clear?"

Toby Plender nodded, and slid his hands into his pockets.

"Yes," he said. "You're a fool — and you deserve all you get."

"Without trimmings," said Mannering. That's what Jimmy said. To make a start, I'll have one of your cigarettes."

He smiled, and Plender followed suit, a little reluctantly. He realised that Mannering had set his course and was not prepared to alter it.

"Any time I can keep you out of the divorce courts," said the solicitor, watching the other take his feet from the desk, "let me know. You stopped just in time with Mimi."

"And you said you'd never heard of her," said Mannering sorrowfully. "Shall I tell you something, Toby?"

"Providing you remember my fee for an opinion is six-and-eightpence."

"Too heavy by far," riposted Mannering. "Well — Mimi's husband hadn't got a case. Nor have any of them. I thought I'd tell you, to ease your mind. Pass it on to Jimmy, will you?"

Mannering told himself as he walked back to the Elan — even now he walked whenever possible, for he was essentially athletic, and fitness was almost an obsession with him — that he had cleared the air a great deal, and that on the whole Toby had taken it well. One thing was certain: no one in the world would know the state of his bank-balance, and it would be easy enough, if he so chose, to create the impression that he was making money. There were many ways of making it, although, in his experience, most of those methods were more likely to have the opposite effect.

There was no reason in his mind, just then, for the move. He was not even playing with the idea that was to seize him very soon with a force that he could not resist. Afterwards it seemed to him that the thing was forming even before he was conscious of it. He felt desperate — and he wanted to gamble; what the gamble was like didn't matter, provided the stakes were high.

Well — he had five thousand pounds, and while any of it remained he did not propose to alter what Toby would have called "his ways". He felt pleased at the step he had taken, even if he did not realise its far-reaching effect.

10.30 a.m. Sam, clerk to Billy Tricker, turf-accountant, lifted the telephone to his ear and gave his employer's name wearily.

"Mannering," said the man at the other end of the wire. "A hundred Blackjack, at sevens, to win . . ."

"Can't do it. Sixes."

"All right, sixes. Double any to come with Feodora, at fives."

"She's up — sixes too. The lot?"

"Yes," said Mannering.

"O.K.," said Sam, and wearily summarised: "One hundred on Blackjack, 2.30, Lingfield, to win; any to come Feodora, 4 o'clock. Both sixes. Thanks, Mr M."

11.30 a.m. "Yes, Mr Mannering, I've several of your cards. Just a moment, Mr Mannering, I'll make a note . . ."

Florette, florist of Bond Street, pulled an order-pad towards her. She repeated Mannering's order in an expressionless voice, but there was a smile on her lips, for in the past twelve months she had taken similar instructions from Mannering so many times that she was beginning to see the funny side of it.

"Four white roses — four *dozen,* I beg your pardon — to Miss Alice Vavasour, at 7 Queen's Gate, and two dozen red carnations to Miss Madaline Sayer, at the Lenville Theatre. Yes, Mr Mannering; thank you, Mr Mannering."

12.30 p.m. "But I really can't, John; I'm rehearsing this afternoon, and I've two shows to-morrow — idiot !"

"Did I hear the renowned Miss Vavasour say "idiot"?" asked

Mannering.

"Only over the telephone. No, I *can't*. I'll see you in the dressing-room. John, be a darling. Yes, lunch *and* tea the day after to-morrow. And, darling, the roses were exquisite, but you shouldn't. . . . Idiot, how could I help it? You'll try and come round to-night?"

1.30 p.m. "They call this place," said Mannering, "the Ritz, and you told me that you would meet me here at one o'clock. Explain, sweet Adeline, how that meant one-thirty."

"A woman's privilege to be late," said Madaline Sayer, "and if you call me Adeline again I'll scratch your face."

"It's no woman's privilege," said Mannering, "to give me indigestion. That's our table. And Adeline's a nicer name than Madaline; more popular too."

Madaline Sayer laughed. She was a little woman with a pink-and-white fluffiness that passed for loveliness, and a genuine contralto that made her a popular star at the Lenville. On that day she was at peace with the world, for it was no mean achievement to take John Mannering from Mimi Rayford. Between Mimi of the Continental and Madaline of the Lenville there existed a rivalry in most things, especially the conquest of man. Conquest of John Mannering, Madaline knew, could only be temporary, but to get him direct from Mimi was just too *ravishing*.

"You're a brute," she said. "What's this about indigestion? Ooo! John, look at the thing inside that frock . . ."

"I've to be at Lingfield at three-fifteen," said Mannering, glancing idly at a debutante in a floral creation which had excited his companion's envy and admiration, "which means that I must be away by two."

"John! I thought we were going to have the whole afternoon. There's that divine house-boat I'm longing to rent this summer . . ."

She pouted, while Mannering ordered lunch, and was still pouting when he laughed at her. The gleam of his teeth against his dark skin seemed to stab her. She looked round the room, and a dozen pairs of eyes turned quickly away, eyes directed at Mannering, not at her. She must play her cards carefully with him. He was as rich as Colossus, they said — or was it Croesus ? — and he was certainly the most exciting man in London. Someone had compared his smile with Rollson's, but Rolly wasn't in it.

She stopped pouting, and tapped his ankle gently beneath the table.

"Well, if you must I suppose you must. Couldn't I. . ."

Her eyes sparkled, and her lips opened slightly in carefully simulated expectation. Mannering chuckled.

"My dear, you look adorable, but I'm going alone. And if we talk too much my digestion's ruined."

"Serve you right," she snapped. She was angry for a moment, and her prettiness was spoiled. "You'll never get to Lingfield in time, anyhow."

"I'm flying from Croydon."

"Trust you."

"I couldn't have lunched with you," said Mannering, "if I'd planned to go by road, so . . ."

"John, you *darling!* Oo, and I forgot. The carnations were *divine.* How did you know that I liked them?"

"You must have let it slip out," said Mannering dryly.

2.05 p.m. Mannering hurried towards the car waiting for him outside the Ritz, but stopped as Toby Plender's voice hailed him.

You again," he smiled. "Don't tell me you've been lunching with the flighty."

"A client," said Plender. "I didn't think it possible, J.M., to go lower than Mimi Rayford, but you win."

"What's this ? Another way of calling me a fool ?"

"There aren't any other ways left," said Plender amiably. "Where are you going?"

"Lingfield, *via* Croydon. Coming?"

"I earn my living."

"I get mine honestly," chuckled Mannering.

He travelled to Croydon by road, and in his haste to catch the plane that was going to the racecourse broke many speed-regulations, and spared little time for thinking. But in the air, with the country-side opening out beneath him like a large-scale relief map, and the sun burning into the cabin, he thought a great deal. Toby was still worrying the bone, even though the solicitor had no idea how close his friend was to the border-line. Even now Mannering was not conscious of the idea that was to master him so soon, but he did recognise that the need for finding a way of making money was increasingly urgent; he had not the slightest desire to go under. Of course, it *was* possible to make money on horses, but. . .

He smiled sardonically, and watched the teeming crowd below as the aeroplane circled over the course and then prepared to land in a near-by field. Despite the fact that he had taken a great deal of trouble to make sure he reached Lingfield, he did not feel the same fascination as he had done a few months before. There was something lacking in the appeal of racing and betting; only the gambler's instinct in him urged him on.

4.00 p.m. Lord Fauntley — plain Hugo Fauntley a few years before — grey-hatted and grey-haired, was fretting nearly as much as the horses at the tape. Mannering, next to him, was smiling easily, hands in pockets and cigarette in the corner of his mouth. The crowd was humming; the raucous voices of the bookies laying their last-minute odds were high above the hum. The line of horses was level at last, and the tape went up.

The crowd roared, and Lord Fauntley bit his lip.

And then the din subsided until it was like distant thunder, with only those spectators near the rails catching the beat of the horses' hoofs thudding against the sun-baked turf. Mannering heard Fauntley shifting from one foot to the other, and smiled.

"Where is she, Mannering, where is she?" Fauntley stammered. "I didn't see — I'm still as nervous as a kitten at this game, and I've been in it more years than I can remember. Where

"She had number five," said Mannering, "and started well. Blackjack dropped to fours, did he?"

"Yes — damn Blackjack !"

"But not Feodora." Mannering grinned, and swept the course through his glasses. He saw the yellow and red of Simmons, on Feodora; he was riding his mount well. Feodora was running fourth, between a little bunch in the lead, and the rest of the field was huddled together twenty yards behind.

"Will she . . ." began Fauntley.

"She's capable of it," said Mannering. "She's moving up. . . The Setter's dropped behind . . ."

"Where are my glasses ?" muttered Fauntley. "I never can find the darned things."

"Shouldn't stuff 'em in your pockets," said Mannering.

He smiled to himself, knowing that Lord Fauntley, with five hundred on Feodora, could have laid five thousand or fifty thousand, and taken a loss without being worried. There would be a certain amusement to be derived from separating Lord Fauntley from the Liska diamond, for instance.

"You had a job getting the Liska," Mannering said aloud.

"Damn the Liska! Where's Feodora ?"

"Second at the mile and a half."

"Second, eh ? And she's a stayer — I know she's a stayer."

"Marriland is coming up," said Mannering thoughtfully.

He was thinking less of Feodora and Marriland, battling now towards the two-mile post ready for the straight run home, than of Lord Fauntley and the Liska diamond. The *Post* that morning had recorded, with its superb indifference, that Fauntley had outbidden Rawson for the diamond at the figure of nine thousand seven hundred and fifty pounds. The Liska would eventually adorn the plump neck of the peeress, and it was difficult to imagine a less worthy resting-place — or so Mannering believed. H'm ! A particularly foolish train of thought.

Was it? Fauntley could stand the loss.

"Where is she?" muttered Fauntley irritably. "Damn it, Mannering, you know my eyes aren't what they were."

"Still second," said Mannering, "and turning into the straight! Ah! Simmons is touching her. Good boy, Simmons ! She'll do it."

The excitement of the finish stirred him now. Feodora and Marriland pounded along the hard track, with the rest of the bunch fighting for third place. The murmur of the crowd was fiercer now, and the sea of white faces turned towards the two horses. Feodora's jockey was using his whip, flicking his horse's flank. Jackson, on Marriland, was hitting his mount. Mannering was watching the faces of the two jockeys through his glasses. Simmons's tense, expectant, hopeful, and Jackson's grim almost to fierceness. Yard by yard the battle was fought, with the winning-post within a hundred yards — ninety — eighty . . ."

"Neck-and-neck," muttered Fauntley nervously.

"She'll do it," said Mannering. "Gome on, Simmons — another yard — you're in the lead."

Fifty yards to go — forty — thirty . . .

Lord Fauntley hopped on one foot, then on the other. Mannering's eyes were very hard and bright. Simmons was almost home.

"Hey!" bellowed Lord Fauntley. "Hey! Hurray 1 She's won!

Feodora, Feodora . . .” He remembered himself suddenly, and scowled, “Sorry, Mannering — excitement. Hal She won, then, she won! Do well ?”

“Fair,” said Mannering. For some reason, one that he could hardly understand, he was tempted to exaggerate his winnings. “I had a thousand with Blackjack, doubled with Feodora.”

“A thousand? Doubled?” Fauntley choked.

“H’m-h’m,” said Mannering, and laughed.

7.00 p.m. “Met that astonishing fellow Mannering,” said Lord Fauntley, as he kissed his wife and dropped into an easy-chair. “Parker — a whisky, with plenty of soda. Astonishing fellow, m’dear — had six thousand on Feodora, and didn’t turn a hair.”

“Six *thousand*!” gasped Lady Fauntley. “Why, the man must be a — a veritable — mustn’t he ?”

“Seems so, seems so,” admitted Fauntley. “Parker, I want that to-day. Not a hair, m’dear — never seen anyone take it easier than he did. Talked about the Liska diamond hallway through the race. Parker!”

“Soda — and whisky, m’lord,” said Parker.

“Ha! Parker, Mr John Mannering will be here for dinner.”

“Very good, m’lord,” said Parker. He went downstairs to relate the latest information, knowing well that the visit of Mannering would pleasantly excite the feminine members of the staff.

Meanwhile Fauntley sipped his whisky and waited for his wife to voice appreciation of his effort.

“You invited him to dinner?” Lady Fauntley preened herself, and patted her husband’s hand. *“That* will show Emmy that she doesn’t have *all* the good fortune, Hugo. How thoughtful of you to invite him!”

“Always thoughtful for you, m’dear.” Fauntley patted his wife’s hand in turn, finished his whisky-and-soda, and smiled. “I

think you could wear the Liska to-night. I didn't know Mannering was interested in stones, but he seems to be, and if he is he'll notice it."

"I'm *sure* he will," said Lady Fauntley. "Hugo, do you think we ought to phone Lorna and tell her ?"

"Lorna ?" Lord Hugo thought suddenly of his daughter, who was not merely single, but apparently satisfied to remain unnoticed by men, eligible or otherwise. She was the despair of the Fauntley family, for she had a distressing habit of saying what was in her mind, and caring nothing for consequences. "Well — I don't want the fellah upset, m'dear. Lorna's got some funny ways . . ."

"But she *adores* him! She said this morning that if we could find a man like Mannering she might think of — of . . . Of course, I'm not fond of her modern ideas, Hugo, but she means well; I'm sure she does. I'D telephone her, dear."

7.15 p.m. The telephone in Lorna Fauntley's studio rang as Lorna was deliberating over crimson lake or crimson pure for the sash on the portrait of Lady Anne Wrigley.

"Damn the phone!" said Lorna equably. "Lake would be a little too bright, perhaps. I'll make it pure. Hallo?"

"Lorna, *darling* !"

"Mother, you ought to be shot. I was just in the middle of something that . . ."

"Yes, dear, I know how busy you are, but I thought you'd like to know that your father's invited Mr Mannering tonight. I just wondered whether . . ."

"John Mannering?" asked Lorna.

"Who else?" asked Lady Fauntley. "Eight o'clock; but if you'd like to come I'll keep dinner back a little while."

"I'm a pig of a daughter," said Lorna Fauntley, "and there are times when I'm ashamed of myself."

"I *understand* you, Lorna."

Lorna laughed. "I really think you do," she said. "Be an angel and send Riddel! over with the car. I've a dress here that I can wear. Bye-bye."

CHAPTER THREE

DINNER AND AN IDEA

"SO THAT'S FAUNTLEY'S DAUGHTER," THOUGHT MANNERING.

During dinner he sat opposite the girl. There was something disturbing about her, he admitted, although he wasn't sure what it was. She wasn't beautiful; remarkable, he told himself, was a word that suited her. Her eyes were grey, thoughtful, and probing. Probing. She had nothing of her mother's lumpiness, and she was taller than either of her parents. Her movements were graceful but unconsidered, almost like a challenge: "Here am I, whether you like the effect or you don't." Mannering did. She looked mutinous, he thought. Her chin was firm, square, and like a man's.

"She's at war with the world," Mannering told himself, "and that means she's unhappy, which suggests an *affaire*. She's twenty-five, or a year or two older, and she's cleverer than her years. H'm."

"He's cynical," Lorna thought, "and I hate cynical men. He's handsome, and I dislike handsome men. He's clever, and knows it, and clever men are detestable. Why do I like him?"

"The most distinguished man I've ever seen," thought Lady Fauntley. "So tall and strong, so reserved. *Just* the man for Lorna — no, I mustn't think of such things." Aloud: "*Do* try a little of that sauce with your fish, Mr Mannering. It's very out of the ordinary."

Mannering smiled and tried it.

"It is," he acknowledged. "Delightful."

"Wait till you try the Cockburn 1900," said Fauntley. "A wine with body in it, real body!"

Mannering felt the girl's eyes on him suddenly — smiling eyes. His own twinkled. Yes, he liked her. He told himself that he must spend an hour looking up the record of her painting. She had a reputation for strong work in the old style, despite her modern tendencies in everything but art. It would be strong work, of course.

Everything about her suggested power.

"I hear you had a wonderful day," said Lady Fauntley.

"Fair," said Mannering, smiling secretly. More than ever he realised the good effect his reputation was creating. No one, not even his closest friends, had any idea that he was so low in money.

He quizzed his hostess for a moment, staring at the Liska diamond in her corsage, and noticing the reddening of her skin under his gaze.

"That's a wonderful stone, Lady Fauntley," he said at length.

"Recognised it, eh?" chuckled Fauntley. "I wondered whether you would. Old Rawson is cursing himself for letting it go, I'll bet."

"Are you interested in precious stones ?" asked Lorna.

Lady Fauntley noticed the sparkle in her daughter's eyes, and was apprehensive. Lorna did say such dreadful things on occasions.

"Always, when they become their wearers," said Mannering.

He was sorry, a moment later. The triteness of the words brought a flicker of amusement to Lorna's eyes. There was something scornful about her expression.

"Almost like pressing button B, wasn't it?" she said mockingly.

"Oh, my dear!" thought Lady Fauntley miserably.

"Darned little idiot!" stormed her husband inwardly, stabbing viciously at his fish.

Mannering laughed, and was glad of the answering laughter in the girl's eyes.

"Touché!" he admitted. "As ye sow, so shall ye reap."

"It doesn't always follow," said Lorna.

"Careful girl, careful," muttered Fauntley to himself. He lived in perpetual fear of the offence Lorna would give to his many visitors. Lorna spoke her mind too much, and, to make things worse, had a mind to speak.

"So *sweet* not to take offence," thought Lady Fauntley.

"I *like* him," Lorna reaffirmed.

Mannering chuckled to himself.

"The Liska's only one of many of yours, Isn't it?" he asked, playing with a spoon. "I've heard rumours that your collection is unrivalled."

"Only rumours ?" Fauntley chuckled, in rare good-humour. "It's the truth, Mannering, take it from me. Like to see them ?"

"After dinner, dear," said Lady Fauntley.

"Of course, of course."

"Thanks," said Mannering. His eyes challenged Lorna's. She was dressed in a black Schiaparelli gown, gathered at the corsage with a single diamond clip, but otherwise she was innocent of jewels. The gleaming white satin of her skin needed none. "You don't like gems ?" he asked her.

"A Roland for my Oliver," thought Lorna. Aloud: "Not so much as I'm supposed to," she admitted.

"But you're free to choose," said Mannering.

"Everything's a darned sight too free-and-easy over here," broke in Fauntley, whose recent political activities tempted him to mount the platform at the slightest opportunity. "Going to the dogs, that's what I think, Mannering, and . . ."

"Do try that *souffle,"* pleaded Lady Fauntley.

Mannering smiled, and the imps of laughter in Lorna's eyes matched his.

The meal passed as pleasantly as it had begun, and Mannering told himself that Lady Fauntley, passive as she was, had more in her to admire than her husband. But there was not the slightest hint of her in Lorna; the girl seemed of a different class. He was enjoying himself much more than he had expected.

They chatted for a while over the Cockburn 1900. Fauntley was jerky both in manner and speech, a little too self-important, as though he were anxious to prepare his guest for an honour indeed. Mannering smiled when he realised the peer's pride in his

possessions, and his heart beat faster when at last they moved — the two ladies had been with them all the time — from the dining-room to the library and thence to the strong-room, built in one corner. If Fauntley was to be believed the collection held so safely in the room was without parallel in England.

And what did the possession of it mean to Fauntley, beyond an outlet for boastfulness that was already more than annoying?

Mannering pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind as Fauntley opened the door of the strong-room and switched on the light.

"Come along in, Mannering — you're one of the half-dozen who've ever been inside, so you can think yourself honoured. Careful with the door, Lorna; we might get shut in. No one else has a key, and our obituary notices would be out before we were. Ha! Don't shiver so, Lucy — only my joke."

Lady Fauntley glanced nervously at the steel door, while her husband played with the combination of one of the sales in the strong-room. Mannering looked round idly. It was as near burglar-proof as a place could be. First the strong-room, with its lock that only gelignite or a key could open. Then the safes inside the room. H'm. If a man wanted to separate Lord Fauntley from some of his precious stones it would be a task worth doing — but as near impossible as anything in the way of cracksmanship. Cracksmanship. . . .

The idea was there now, and growing apace.

Mannering felt tense and excited, and he could hardly keep his eyes off the peer's fingers. Had ever a man had such an opportunity for learning the combination of a safe first-hand ?

The place was as nearly burglar-proof as it could be, but there were flaws in the system, and not the least was Lord Fauntley's memory. Fauntley muttered under his breath, and then lost his patience and grumbled aloud.

“Damn the thing! Sorry, Lucy, but I never can remember the numbers. I’ve a note of them somewhere — they’re changed every week, Mannering, just as an added sale-guard.”

“And you need plenty,” Mannering said easily.

“I look after that,” Fauntley said, rooting through his pockets. He brought out a slim black note-book at last, flicked over the pages, and muttered, “Four right — six left — seven right — ten left — four — eight.” He snapped the book to, and returned it briskly to his pocket.

Mannering deliberately looked away from him, but the numbers were turning over in his mind. He could not stop them — he was by no means sure he wanted to.

“Four right — six left — seven right — ten left.” He’d lost the last two, but, providing he looked back in time to see Fauntley’s final turning, he could pick them up again.

His eyes felt hot, and his chest was constricted. With an effort he forced a smile as Lorna’s eyes looked into his, twinkling. What would these people think if they knew what was passing through his mind?

The tumblers were clicking over now. Left, they dropped slowly to ten. Right, one — two — three — four. Left, seven or eight, he wasn’t sure which, for Fauntley broke out: “That’s got him. It needs to be secure, Mannering, but you can leave that to me. My strong-room’s the nearest thing to perfection of its kind in London — and that means the world, let me tell you. For instance” — Fauntley reached for a large leather case in the safe that yawned open now, and made Mannering’s fingers itch — “you noticed I was careful to lock the library door behind us when we came in?”

“Yes.” Mannering looked calm, even though his heart was thumping.

“To warn the servants you were on the prowl ?” mocked Lorna.

“Quiet, my dear. Also to cut off the alarms at the strongroom. I’ve left strict instructions that the library door must *never* be locked, because when it’s open any touching of the sale or strong-room would send the alarm off — and it’s some row, I can tell you! Ingenious, eh ?”

“Most,” admitted Mannering, and something more than the humour of the situation was gleaming in his eyes.

“Supposing a man came through the window?” asked Lorna.

“It doesn’t make any difference, my dear. I tell you the door’s *never* locked unless I’m here. Still, that doesn’t matter now. Mannering, have a look at these. . . .”

While he talked, and while Mannering recovered from the effect of the “that doesn’t matter” — could anything matter as much to him as that comprehensive explanation of the first essential for getting at the strong-room without sending the alarm off? — Fauntley had been manipulating the leather case. Now he unlocked it, with a key taken from a ring in his pocket. The light from the single electric lamp in the strong-room seemed to shiver and give fire. The room was a blaze of twinkling lights, of gold and silver and a thousand colours that were never still.

The light shone on diamonds set in the black velvet of the case. A single-piece tiara held the centre, glittering and blazing; rings surrounded it, while beneath it was a necklace, bordered by bracelets that dangled so often on Lady Fauntley’s plump wrists. The room was alive!

“Well?” breathed Fauntley.

“Terrific!” muttered Mannering. “I’d no idea you’d anything like this, Fauntley. Wonderful!”

“Watch this,” said Fauntley.

He was a bundle of excitement as he peered at the stones, and his hands trembled. Lady Fauntley was breathless. Lorna said nothing, and the fire danced from the diamonds to her eyes.

Mannering found the spell of the diamonds almost too much for him; for the first time he stopped repeating to himself the numbers of the combination. He'd never forget them now. God! What an idea — cracksmanship!

Fauntley took a pocket-lamp from a shelf in the room and flicked the light on as he held the glass close to the stones. As it travelled, within a few inches of the collection, the diamonds seemed to move like living fire. Shimmering and cascading, fascinating and compelling, they lived.

Fauntley broke the silence at last.

"There you are, Mannering — the Gabrienne collection, reckoned the purest stones found during the early nineteenth century. It's my prize piece. I've others, of course, but in ones and twos; there's no collection to match this. I'm talking of diamonds, of course. The Karenz rubies are matchless too, and the Deveral sapphires. Let me see . . ." The peer rubbed his forehead and frowned. "You must see the rubies — I think they're in the third safe."

Mannering saw them, and a dozen other examples of the jewel-setter's art that made his eyes agate-hard. He could take gems from this room worth ten or twenty thousand pounds, and Fauntley would hardly notice they were gone. In the safe where the Gabrienne collection was kept there were half a dozen other cases of smaller stones; *and he knew the combination!* If he managed to get them it might be months before Fauntley missed what had been taken.

He was nearing the end of his run, he knew. The Black-jack-Feodora double helped a little, but unless he stopped gambling his resources would last another month, perhaps; two at the outside. It was absurd, he admitted, to rely on winning enough to keep going; he would soon touch bottom.

What did that mean ?

It meant absolute poverty, the loss of position, the loss of friends, the loss of pleasures. It meant going without clothes — real clothes — and perhaps without food. He had realised all that before, of course, but he had not faced it. He had determined to strain the flesh-pots of indulgence to their utmost, and then let Fate make of him what it wanted. In fact, he admitted, he had never faced what would happen *after* the crash; he had only known that the crash would come, and that anything was better than the life he had been leading over the past five years. Until the month at Overndon he had been contented enough. He admitted it. But the Overndon month had split him asunder.

What followed had been an interesting experiment.

Mimi Rayford, Madaline Sayer, Alice Vavasour, all had been interesting, up to a point. They had been amusing, up to the same point. Betting was at once interesting, amusing, and occasionally exciting, and consequently was a point above Mimi, Madaline, and Alice; and, of course, there were other people and other things.

They had all been intriguing and amusing and had made life pleasantly varied; occasionally they had even given a notable kick to the business of living. But there had been nothing vital. *Vital!*

Mannering looked away from the Karenz rubies, and saw Lorna Fauntley's eyes quizzing his. His lips curved, and hers responded. The mutiny, the mockery, the boredom, in her eyes were lost for a moment, and her teeth flashed.

"Impressed, Mr Mannering?"

"Overwhelmed," said Mannering truthfully.

"Not the first nor the last," said Lord Fauntley, locking his precious rubies in their safe. "Well, that's the lot. Just a minute, Lucy, my dear; you're in the way. Ha! Well, Mannering? Not many people would like to try conclusions with that strong-room, *and* an armed man on guard while the best stones are inside. Lucy! Don't unlock the library door until the strong-room's closed. All right

now, my dear."

They walked slowly across the library, and Mannering's mind was humming with the words "*and* an armed man". That was something he hadn't expected. He looked about him, and caught sight of the man sitting unobtrusively in a corner of the room. He was reading, and didn't look up, even when Fauntley went to a bureau near him, unlocked it, and dropped a key into a drawer. Then he locked the drawer and turned towards the others.

But Mannering knew what had happened, and he could scarcely believe that luck was breaking his way so much. Fauntley kept the key of the strong-room in that bureau. Of course, in many ways it was safe; few people would look for it there, unless they knew it could be found.

Mannering *knew*; and he was telling himself that the bureau-drawer could be prised open in a few seconds.

He glanced again at the guard, a short, stocky fellow who would be difficult to get past; difficult, but not impossible by any means. . . .

"What are you going to do after *that?"* asked Lorna.

Mannering, leaning against the marble mantelpiece of the lounge, surveyed his companion silently for several seconds. Lord and Lady Fauntley, abruptly conscious of the duties of parenthood, had disappeared on some mysterious errand, and Mannering had been with their daughter for several minutes. Neither had spoken until that question.

Mannering shrugged his shoulders at last.

"Do I satisfy?" Lorna asked suddenly.

"Y'know, you shouldn't have said that," said Mannering. "You're not made for peddling the obvious."

"Isn't this isolation of the young with the eligible just as obvious?" demanded Lorna, her eyes smouldering. "Or do you still

preserve your innocence in a world of matchmaking parents?"

"Sometimes it's folly to be wise," said Mannering, and took a deep breath. "I like your mother."

"Poor Dad!"

"Rich, I thought the better word. In more ways than one."

A tinge of colour flooded the girl's cheeks. In the soft light of the lounge she had a loveliness that a harsher light might have mocked.

"And are you considering your verdict?" she asked with an effort. "While mother's saying, "I wonder *if*" and Dad's grunting, "Not a chance, m'dear; the little fool's got no sense."

"It's a regular performance, then?"

"Almost a vicious habit. But lately it's been . . . I've been away more often. You may have heard" — her eyes danced — "that I paint."

He smiled and nodded.

"I've heard it rumoured."

"Of course. So many of your friends belong to the studio set, don't they?"

Mannering laughed, and took his cigarette-case from his waistcoat-pocket. Lorna shook her head as he proffered it.

"You keep saying what you're not feeling," Mannering said, as he selected a cigarette and poised it in the air. "It seems out of character to me. There are pretty cats and pretty women, each admirable of their species, but when a woman turns cat she seems all claws — from the man's point of view."

"Some men's. Anyhow" — she flushed — "I'm sorry. What were you thinking of in there?"

"You want the truth?"

"It's not entirely out of fashion — even in our age."

"I was wondering what your eyes would look like if a lamp was held in front of them, as it was held over the diamonds."

“Ye-es. You’re capable of thinking like that. What else ?”

“I was wondering what the chances were of breaking into the strong-room,” said Mannering, laughing. He hardly knew what dare-devil spirit prompted the statement; it came almost unbidden.

She stared at him for a moment, and he was puzzled by the expression in her eyes.

Finally her lips curved.

“Ye-es,” she said again; “I believe you’re capable of that too.”

“Of thinking of it?”

“Even doing it.”

Mannering lit his cigarette, glad of the chance to keep his eyes averted. God! She was near the mark! And he was a fool to have mentioned the idea.

“H’m. Well, it’s a good job I can resist that temptation,” he said. “I’m not thinking of trying it yet. And now, with the night still young, what next ?”

“I liked that “yet”,” she said.

“Forget it.”

“I doubt if I ever shall, so be careful. As for the rest of the evening, I’d rather like to dance in a crowd, where there’s no room to move or breathe, the noise negroid, and the band to match. But I think it would be fairer to go back to my studio.”

“You sleep there?”

“The question and answer could be misconstrued,” Lorna said, “but I’ll risk it. Yes, sometimes.”

“Why would it be fair?”

“Fairer, I said. Because I dislike rousing false hopes in fond parents.”

Mannering laughed, and smoke streamed from his lips.

“Frankness can be almost a vice,” he said. “But I rarely wonder what others will think. If I’m amused, I’m satisfied.”

“You think I’ve possibilities, then?”

“I’d like to prove it.”

Lorna laughed, but the mockery was back in her eyes.

“Do you ever think of anything but amusement ?”

“Why, yes. I think so. I study Ruff’s *Guide.”*

“That’s an evasion.”

“Naturally,” acknowledged Mannering, chuckling. “Is there time these days to cope with anything but amusement ? It’s a life’s work to watch for every variety.”

“I believe, too, you even work overtime.”

“I wasn’t thinking of musical comediennes.” Mannering smiled. “They’re the novice grades. There are endless other things — and I’ve found them all wanting.”

“It may have been you who were wanting.”

“More than likely, but my education’s not finished. Well, it’s something past ten. How does the Dernier suggest itself?”

“No other dates?”

“Two. One I’ve already missed; the other I’m willing to forget.”

“H’m.” Her eyes held his, with a glimmer of mingled amusement, mockery, and challenge. “Should I trust myself to such a memory ?”

Mannering laughed as he crushed his cigarette into a tray.

“The safest way never to lose a thing is never to have it,” he said.

“I’m ready to try anything once,” said Lorna. “While I powder my nose, spread the good news among the parents, and try not to see the light in their eyes.”

She turned away easily, and walked towards the stairs. Mannering stood watching her, and his lips moved.

“A cat,” he said, “but a wild-cat. Lord, what a life! One Lucy and one Hugo produced her. *Her!”*

And she liked that “yet”.

At half-past one they left the Dernier Club, and Mannering handed Lorna into a taxi.

“Chelsea,” he asked, “or Langford Terrace?”

“Langford Terrace,” said Lorna. “Even for the West home’s best — and probably safest.”

Mannering instructed the driver and climbed into the cab.

“That remark,” he said, as they moved from the kerb, “was the fourth you’ve made to-night that wasn’t worthy of you.”

“Both your standards and your arithmetic sound horribly precise,” Lorna said.

“And need revising for the brave new world?” chuckled Mannering. “Well, was the Dernier nearer your standard ?”

“Divine — if only there’d been a decent floor, plenty of room, and a breath of air,” she answered.

“You’ve forgotten the negro band that should have been white,” said Mannering. “Are you trying to convince me you are typical of the variable feminine ?”

“I may be, but I wasn’t trying to convince you of anything. I think I’d like to paint you. Head and shoulders.”

“Thanks, but I prefer photographs.”

“They can only reflect what you look like, not what you are.”

“What am I?”

“I haven’t discovered — yet.”

Mannering chuckled.

“I liked that “yet”,” he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

TOUCH-AND-GO

JOHN MANNERINQ HAD ENJOYED THE EVENING, NOT SOLELY because of the discovery that Lorna Fauntley was what he called, for want of a better description, intriguing. The Fauntley strong-room remained in his thoughts like a sharp etching — something he could not forget. He remembered, for he had forced them into his mind, the numbers of the safe's combination; and there was little about the precautions Fauntley took to guard his collection that Mannering didn't know. If there was one thing that really worried him, it was the armed guard.

By now Mannering had thoroughly accustomed himself to the thought that he would start a campaign of cracksman-ship, even though so far the thing was hazy in his mind, and he was tempted to laugh at it rather than take it seriously. What easier way of making money than as a gentleman-thief?

A thief? The word made him stop and think. "Cracksman" sounded more pleasant; it gave the project a Robin Hood gallantry; but if he was to be honest with himself, and it was absurd to be anything else, he would earn the name of thief — and deserve it.

As he thought of these things a sardonic smile curved the corners of his lips. If the word itself was hard to face, so were facts. Cash he must have, and quickly, or he would go under. Going under was the devil, whereas his very life gave him opportunities to steal in a hundred places — yes, and without the slightest risk of suspicion.

The decision that had been hovering in his mind came to a head on the afternoon following the dinner at the Fauntleys'. Mannering weighed up the chances coolly, and decided that the odds favoured him. In the Fauntley strongroom he had been presented with as near a "sitter" as a cracksman could pray for, and

it was almost like looking a gift-horse in the mouth to refuse the opportunity.

The decision being reached, he did not propose to lose much time. The quicker he made the plunge the better.

He realised that there were several things he would need, but most important of all, he told himself, was a weapon to help him in emergency. He decided cheerfully that the most effective would be a gas-pistol with a load of diluted gas, but for the moment that was impossible. He had an old Army revolver, however, without ammunition to fit it; if he took it with him it might have a demoralising effect on anyone he met — it was absurd, he knew, to be sure that he would get through without some trouble — and if necessary its butt would come in useful as a club. Yes, the revolver was what he wanted.

The rest was comparatively easy.

Towards evening, with the prospect of the raid on the Fauntley house making his heart beat fast, he spent an hour making various small purchases. For tools he told himself he needed two small screwdrivers, two thin files, and a tiny hammer. He bought a pair of thin rubber gloves from a department-store, and later a pair of rubber-soled golf-shoes. Finally — and he chuckled when the idea came — he bought a handkerchief with the initials T.B. on it. The initials meant nothing to him then — and he had no idea what they were likely to mean; he proposed to use it simply as an admirable “clue” to leave behind for the police.

He was ready.

And he was going through with the first effort; he knew that until he did he would be restless; as much as anything else he was hungering for a gamble that carried a real risk, and, providing his victims were sufficiently wealthy to sustain the financial loss, his conscience would not trouble him.

He felt cool enough as he approached the Fauntley home that

night, and his nerves seemed steadier than ever as he walked towards Langford Terrace and entered the grounds of the house by the side-entrance. It was shadowed there, and he was hidden from the street by a thick hedge. The situation was perfect, for one of the library windows opened on to this side of the house.

And there was a light coming from it, given by the reading-lamp in one corner, where the armed guard was sitting and waiting for the dawn to come. Mannering knew he had only to outwit the man and he was through. *Only!*

Very softly, and with a set smile on his lips, he approached the window.

Misgivings stronger than any that had attacked him before flooded through John Mannering's mind as he came closer to the window. The odds against him seemed multiplied enormously; the slightest slip now, and he would be in the armed guard's power; the police would be called; Fauntley would recognise him. He felt hot, and his hands trembled as he touched the window-sill.

He told himself that he had been too impetuous: he should have taken more than a single afternoon to collect the things he would need for burglary; he wasn't making capital of his advantages as he should have done; he was acting like a fool, making his first attempt as though he had been schooled in the East End by practised thieves. Before he was qualified to try to raid a place from the outside he would have to learn a lot in the art of safe-breaking, of forcing entries, of covering his tracks.

On the other hand, once he was in the strong-room he could get at the one safe without any trouble. The combination ran through his mind time and time again, word-perfect. But he should have given up the idea when he had heard of the armed guard.

The back of his neck and his forehead were sticky. He could see the guard in a far corner, and he wondered whether the man would shoot to kill if he met with an intruder. His courage seemed

to ebb away. . . .

Three words that flashed across his mind halted the flight of his nerves, and made his smile more natural. He seemed to see Lorna Fauntley's eyes, and hear her murmured "Even doing it".

He *was* capable of doing it. Damn it, he couldn't go so far and then back out. The door of the strong-room was less than twenty feet away from him; he could see the polished brass of the door-knob, and a picture of the glittering cascade of the Gabrienne collection came to his mind. He breathed more steadily, and he dipped his gloved right hand into his pocket.

He smiled more when he felt cold steel through the thin rubber of his gloves. The Army revolver, a relic of the days of the War — he had been in Flanders for the last year of it — rested there. He had been wise enough to bring it unloaded; to risk carrying loaded weapons would have been insane, for the authorities dealt harshly with armed thieves. Now the precautions he had taken and the preparations he had made seemed more reasonable.

He left the revolver in his pocket, and took out one of the screwdrivers. Every pocket of his coat contained something that would help him — a file, a torch, the handkerchief marked T.B. He had no real idea of what tools he would want, but the screwdriver would be best for levering up the window.

He glanced up, seeing that the top frame was open a little. The window was unlatched. Unless the bottom frame squeaked as he pushed it up there was a chance that he would get in without rousing the guard. Fauntley had unwittingly relieved him of several causes for anxiety. He knew that he could open the window without starting an alarm-bell, for the only alarm was controlled by the strongroom door.

He exerted a little pressure after wedging the chisel-end of the screwdriver beneath the window, and felt it move a fraction of an

inch. There was no sound at all. Very gently, and with his breath coming faster every second, he levered it up. There was an inch to spare now — ample room for his -fingers.

He replaced the screwdriver, and took the revolver from his pocket, resting it on the sill. All the time the noise of late traffic passing the Terrace came to his ears, while occasionally he heard the hurrying footsteps of a man or a woman, and he found it hard not to let these sounds distract him. But as he put his fingers beneath the window he forgot everything except the man sitting in the far corner, whose heavy features were thrown into strong relief by the reading-lamp.

Mannering pushed the window up another inch, fraction by fraction. Suddenly the man in the corner moved. Mannering stopped, his limbs suddenly very cold. The guard lifted his head, looking towards the window, and darted his hand towards his pocket.

"God," thought Mannering, "it's all up!"

He couldn't have turned away if he had wanted to; he felt there was no strength at all in his limbs. He stared, fascinated by the approaching disaster.

And then he saw the handkerchief in the guard's hand, saw his head go back, and heard a sneeze that seemed to shatter the silence. Mannering's heart turned over — or so he thought — and then his mind worked very quickly; he saw how he could turn the absurd development to advantage. He was still cold after the moment of fear, but he pushed at the window less cautiously now.

The guard sneezed three times, and by the time he had stopped the window was up two feet or more, and moving noiselessly. Mannering pushed it another foot, and then, as the other put his handkerchief back into his pocket, backed away from the window, taking shelter by the walls. He could see his man, saw the quick glance round the room . . . .

“Close,” Mannering muttered under his breath. “Thank the Lord for that sneeze! . . .”

He stopped muttering, and his eyes gleamed. He saw the guard glance towards the window again, and he realised that the other man was probably feeling a draught. Even as the thought flashed through his mind he saw the other move, and he realised that the open window would shout suspicion.

And then Mannering saw how it would also help him.

Breathing very softly, he drew into the shadows, waiting, as the guard came soft-footed towards the window. He could just see the man as he reached the window, and he saw him peer suspiciously. He could almost hear him thinking, asking himself whether he had for once forgotten to close the window or whether it *had* just been pushed up.

Mannering took just time enough to measure the distance, and then he acted. With the muzzle of the revolver in his hand he swung his right arm. The butt of the gun crashed into the man’s solar plexus; there was a single gasp, not loud enough to make itself heard more than a few yards away, and the guard staggered back.

In an instant Mannering was alter him. But as he climbed into the room his coat caught, and he wasted precious seconds. The guard had recovered sufficiently to dart his hand towards his own gun when Mannering looked up. His hand moved, and his unloaded gun was very threatening. The guard hesitated.

“Put your hands up,” said Mannering very softly.

The words were low, but the guard heard them while his fingers were dipping into his pocket. He stopped, seeing the gun in Mannering’s hand for the first time, seeing too a tall, heavily-built man clad from chin to knees in a mackintosh, with a trilby pulled low over his eyes and a handkerchief tied loosely round his neck. Mannering knew he might need to pull that up as a mask later, but while it was necessary to talk he couldn’t use it.

He drew his right leg into the room and straightened up. The guard stared, without moving, his eyes on the gun. Mannering's lips curved a little as he realised that the other was prepared to take many chances, but not to risk his life even for the Fauntley jewels. His hands were level with his ears.

"Put them right up," Mannering said, still softly and in a voice that Lord Fauntley himself would not have recognised. "Now stand up."

The other obeyed without a word. Mannering's eyes danced, and for a moment he was tempted to count his chickens too soon. Gad! This was child's play.

He stopped smiling, and walked slowly across the room until he was within ten feet of his victim. Then he ordered again: Turn round and face the wall — and keep those hands up!"

It was like watching a film; Mannering couldn't get it into his mind that it was really happening, that he'd made his first step. But if there was unreality about it at least his brain worked quickly, and prompted him to step quickly to the guard as the man's back was turned towards him. Nor did he hesitate as he reached within striking-distance. This was the worst part of the job, but it couldn't be avoided.

He moved his revolver, gripping it by the barrel, and rapped quickly at the back of the guard's close-cropped head. The man gasped and grunted, swaying a little uncertainly. Mannering pocketed his gun, swung the other round, and jerked an upper-cut that connected with a vicious snap. The guard's body sagged, and his eyes rolled.

Mannering felt panic very close to him now, but he gritted his teeth and kept it at bay. He supported the heavy body, letting it drop softly to the floor, and then straightening the limbs comfortably. He felt for the pulse, and found it beating well enough; a smile of relief crossed his face. Then he sought for the man's own

handkerchief, and, rolling it into a ball, stuffed it into the ample mouth.

"He won't be able to shout for a long time," Mannering muttered, and his eyes gleamed. It was short work to complete the job, using the guard's belt to secure his wrists behind him.

Now for the bureau — and the key.

Mannering searched quickly, finding what he wanted with little trouble; the lock needed little forcing. He felt no thrill as his fingers touched the key of the strong-room; and now he found he had to guard against an impulse to hurry. The one thought in his mind was to get the job over, and escape from the house. He felt it was stifling him; two sides of his nature were warring, the one contemptuous at the way he was betraying Fauntley's trust, the other mocking, as he told himself it was just another way of gambling. . . .

He learned then, and was to prove it time and time again afterwards, that the thrill of the game ended when the obstacles were overcome. There was nothing to stop him now; it was a thousand-to-one chance against anyone else coming to the strong-room at this time of night. The difficult part was over, and Mannering wanted to get it finished.

He ignored the guard, and stepped to the door of the strong-room, smiling a little, but with the need for urgency in his mind. He slid the key into the hole . . .

Then lie went rigid, and alarm seared through him. Fauntley had warned him, yet he'd forgotten it — forgotten that if the library door wasn't locked when the strong-room lock turned the alarm would clamour out in the silence l He was white-faced as he withdrew the key slowly; and not until it was safe in his pocket did he breathe freely. Then the spasm of panic — the third he had had that night — went quickly. He smiled again, crossed to the door, and turned the key in the lock.

“It would have been my own fault,” he muttered. “Gad, but it shakes your nerves!”

Despite his words his hand was steady as he turned the key and a few seconds later pulled open the heavy door of the room that held the priceless collection. His ears were strained, and he half-expected to find that Fauntley hadn’t told the truth — that the alarm would ring. But no sound came beyond the sighing from the door as it turned on its well-oiled hinges.

He was inside now.

A feeling of triumph overwhelmed every other thought. He stood in the open doorway, looking at the room with its walls lined with safes. The third safe on the right held his attention — the one that contained the Gabrienne collection and a dozen other smaller pieces.

Now he wanted the combination. It was on the tip of his tongue as he stepped to the safe.

“Four right — six left . . .”

He muttered each figure under his breath as he turned the knob, and the clicking of the tumblers seemed to fill the small room. The seconds dragged, and he was fretting with impatience. “Ten left — four right — eight left. . . .”

He heard the final click, and pulled the door. It yielded to his pressure, and in a moment he was looking at the leather cases. The Gabrienne collection was the nearest, and the temptation to take it was overwhelming. He argued with himself, and at last common sense won. Every stone in that collection was known throughout the world; he would never be able to dispose of it.

He didn’t bother to force open the smaller cases, but selected three that would fit easily into his pocket. He tucked them away, breathing very fast. There was no need to wait to shut the door, either of the strong-room or the safe; the bound and gagged guard would be evidence enough of the robbery.

He turned away from the open safe, and as he did so something slid down his leg. The unexpected movement made him jump, and the little thud as the thing hit the floor made him tighten his lips. He looked down.

Then he smiled, and passed his left hand across his fore-head. It was absurd, but one of the cases of gems had missed his pocket, and, as he had moved, had slipped to the floor. He was doing most of the things he shouldn't do.

As he bent down to retrieve the case he saw the small gold plaque on it for the first time. He frowned a little, seeing an inscription. He read the words quickly, and as he did so his brows darkened, and his teeth showed for a moment in a mirthless smile.

For the inscription read, "To Lorna from Dad, Christmas, 1934."

To Lorna! The girl's eyes, humorous and resentful in turn, mocking and somehow suggesting disillusion, seemed to be in front of him as he stared at the inscription. Very slowly, and hardly able to explain the weariness that was passing through his limbs, he took the other wallets, expecting what he found. Both of them were Lorna's, one from her mother, the other from Fauntley himself

Mannering's eyes held mockery of himself just then. He knew that he could no more take the girl's jewels than he could take the Gabrienne collection, and for a stronger reason. Call it chivalry, call it what he liked — he couldn't force himself to rob her.

But there was still no humour in his smile as he turned back to the safe, although he laughed silently as he ran through the wallets one by one. The only jewels in there, apart from the Gabrienne collection, were Lorna Fauntley's. . . .

"And I don't know the combination of any of the others," he said, his lips twisted. "I'm damned if I'll take these."

He felt the temptation to go back on that decision, and he shut and locked the safe-door quickly. A glance towards the guard

showed that the man was still unconscious, and there was no sound from outside. He had plenty of time to try one of the other combinations. It wasn't impossible to get them by experimenting.

He turned from the door of the strong-room, but as he did so he caught, for the first time, the faintest rustle of sound. His body went rigid, and he stared towards the window, A dozen questions flashed pell-mell through his mind. Was it a policeman — a late servant — or his imagination?

No — there was someone at the window. The sound came again, softly, warningly. As it reached his ears he acted, switching off the strong-room light to put himself into shadows, and moving very fast across the room, his gun clasped in his hand. His palm was sticky.

Not until he was half-way to the window did he see who it was; and then he pulled up short, and the realisation that he was seen — *recognised* — flashed through his mind. Recognised — by Lorna Fauntley!

She was standing by the open window, staring in, and even in the gloom he imagined he could see the smouldering mockery in her eyes. She was looking squarely at him. . . . God, what a tool he war I Of course she couldn't recognise him: he had pulled the handkerchief over his mouth and chin, his eyes were hidden by the brim of his hat, and the mackintosh made his figure unrecognisable. She couldn't *know* him. But if not, why didn't she move ? She was standing motionless, almost as if she were challenging him.

It wasn't until then that he realised that he had his gun trained on her, that it had been directed towards her from the moment he had turned round. She daren't move without risking a bullet, and that discovery put another thought into Mannering's mind. If she'd seen through his disguise she would have spoken; certainly she would not have been afraid of the gun. As it was, the gun was bidding her to be silent.

He smiled beneath the handkerchief, and now the zest for the game returned to him. There was danger here, and more than a spice of it, a difficulty to get past, a chance to exercise his wits — the Lord knew they needed it after tonight. Well, the gun had been the only talker so far, and it could keep talking for a while. He was ten feet or more from the window, and lie could see her clearly, even to the steady rising and falling of her breast. He motioned with the gun, beckoning her towards him.

She hesitated, and he took a threatening step forward; it carried the necessary persuasion, for she spoke at last.

"All right" — she might have been talking over the dinner-table for all the nervousness in her voice — "I'll come."

She climbed in, easily and gratefully, and Mannering had a fleeting glimpse of a slim, silk-clad leg and a trim ankle. The next moment she was in the room, and he jerked the gun, motion her back from the window. She obeyed, slowly, and now he could sec her eyes more clearly, and feel her contempt. It stung him, and beneath his mask his face went red, but he brushed the thought from his mind quickly.

They had turned completely round, facing each other all the time. Her back was towards the open strong-room door, and under the shadow of his hat his eyes gleamed suddenly. The strong-room, of course. He could shut her in there, and be sure she was safe and unable to stop his escape. It was the only way; not for a moment had he contemplated treating her as he had treated the guard.

The gun acted as spokesman again; she shrugged her shoulders, and backed a pace towards the strong-room. Two paces . . .

And then she stopped, her face flushed suddenly. Mannering went rigid, but he forced himself not to look away from her, although the sound that had jarred through the silence came again — a rattling at the library door.

Then he heard Fauntley's voice, high-pitched and half-hysterical.

"Morgan — Morgan! Unlock the door — unlock it, I tell you!"

John Mannering knew that he had only a few minutes to get away; perhaps less than a minute, for Fauntley would raise an alarm immediately, and the windows would be guarded soon. He couldn't think for some ten seconds, and then his mind cooled. For the first time he spoke to Lorna Fauntley, but he hardly recognised his own voice: it was a snarl, harsh and guttural.

"Get in, you!"

She was appalled by the sudden ferocity of his words, and she dropped back, pale-faced. He stepped after her, his left hand outstretched, but rather than let him touch her she turned and ran into the strong-room — a picture he would retain for many years. He had no time for smiling, though, and he slammed the door on her, turning the key in the lock quickly and leaving it there. Fauntley had called out twice, and then the sound of his footsteps had followed. As Mannering leapt towards the window a gong boomed out in the hall, loud and threatening.

That was the first alarm — and no one but Fauntley was likely to be about for another minute, while already Mannering was half-way through the window. He felt the asphalt beneath him as he jumped, balanced himself quickly, and raced, not towards the front-entrance, but towards the rear, which opened on to a small street leading to Park Lane. As he ran through the garden he saw first one light at the top of the house blaze, then another and another. He was breathing hard, but running well within himself. He reached the street safely. Should he turn right, towards Park Lane, or left?

He decided on the former, and shed his mackintosh as he went. In its pocket was the handkerchief with the false initials, and he had time to smile grimly as he dropped the coat to the ground,

and then turned the brim of his hat up. He stopped running, and he was breathing more regularly when he reached Park Lane and turned towards Piccadilly. There was just one thing he wanted now — a taxi.

An empty one overtook him after two or three minutes, and he beckoned it thankfully, giving the driver instructions to drive to Victoria Station. As he sank back in the cab a film of sweat broke over his face and hands, and he shivered a little.

It was over: the ice was broken. He couldn't call it a failure, for he had learned a great deal. As he cooled down he stopped shivering: and twice within the next five minutes he chuckled aloud.

"Nothing taken, thank God!" said Lord Fauntley to John Mannering some thirty-six hours later. They had met at the Carlton Club, and Fauntley was full of the burglary. "Lorna must have scared the thief, Mannering, before he had time to get at the combinations. I thought I heard something, and I wasn't long moving."

"No one hurt, I hope ?" Mannering asked.

"Not seriously. The night-guard was knocked unconscious, but nothing worse. Well, I'll make sure in future, Mannering — *two* guards all the time."

"It would be wiser," admitted Mannering, proffering cigarettes. "Anything for the police to go on?"

"Police?" Fauntley snorted as he accepted a cigarette. "What do you expect from them, Mannering ? They actually had the man's mackintosh, *and* a handkerchief marked with his initials — T.B. or something — but they haven't found a thing. Still" — his lordship smiled cheerfully — "they didn't have to look for jewels, thank heavens! Well, we needn't talk about that. Er — we spent a delightful evening, Mannering. If you're free one day next week, spend it with us. You can ?"

"Delighted."

"Then that's fixed, that's fixed," said Fauntley jauntily. "We'll be delighted, Mannering, delighted. Tuesday, if it's all right with you? Splendid! And now I'll have to be going."

They shook hands, and Mannering smiled thoughtfully as the peer stumped out of the lounge. Obviously Fauntley didn't suspect. But Lorna ?

"I'll take a chance," Mannering said to himself. "I don't think she'll have any idea — I don't see how she can."

He was prepared to swear, after dinner on the following Tuesday, that she had no idea at all that he had been in the strong-room. She talked more on that second night, mostly of the burglary. Her sympathies, Mannering discovered, were inclined to be with the burglar, but she had been scared when he had snarled at her.

"What made you go down?" he asked, as they drove towards their second *tete-á-tete* at the Dernier Club. "It must have been late ? Three or four o'clock ?"

"Not more than hall-past two," Lorna said. "I had been to the Ran-Tan, and I was back late . . ."

"You're developing a negroid complex." Mannering smiled.

"Don't joke with a serious subject. I went to the back-door — Dad doesn't like leaving the front unbolted — and I saw the light in the library. So I looked in . . ."

"You were asking for trouble," said Mannering.

"I nearly got it. That man's gun was the most cold-blooded tiling I've ever seen. But" — she brushed her hand through her hair and smiled, without much humour — "let's forget it. I've told the story to the police and to Dad and to every Tom, Dick, and Harry I haven't been able to dodge. Let's dance."

They danced; and for a second time Mannering enjoyed an evening with her. But all the time he felt that there was something she wanted to say, yet held back.

CHAPTER FIVE

AN ADVENTURE IN SHARES

"FOR BETTER OR WORSE," GRUNTED TOBY PLENDER, "AND naturally you've chosen worse. Somewhere in the back of my mind, J. M., one or two words are jogging round. They're not very clear, and they sound suspiciously like Kipling when I want to use 'em. . . ."

He broke off, eyeing Mannering evenly.

"I've an idea," grinned Mannering, "that they begin with P-T-G. A soul-stirring poem, Toby. Play up, play up, and play . . . No, I can't say 'em. They stick."

"They ought to." snapped Plender.

It was a month after Mannering's attempt on the Fauntley jewels, and a great many things had happened in the interval concerning Mannering and the Fauntleys. Mannering had met Plender that morning, and the solicitor had suggested lunch at his flat; Mannering, smiling to himself, had accepted the invitation. As he had expected, Plender was harping on the old theme.

"Then that's all right," said Mannering. "They ought to, and they do. What are you worrying about?"

"You," said Plender, "and — well, never mind the "and". . . . I suppose you've been on the winning end for a week or two?"

"If you mean that I've been winning money," said Mannering, "I have. Heavily. Only don't ask my bank-manager how much. He's a funny fellow, with a peculiar objection to disclosing the state of my account."

Plender rubbed the tip of his hooked nose.

"So you're still rattled about that, are you?"

"Toby," said Mannering, "you misunderstand me. You and Jimmy acted with the best of intentions, and anything but gratitude would be out of the question. And that's by the way; it's past now."

“It’s a pity,” said Plender, “that you’ve struck a good patch. One or two heavy losses just now might have made you see sense. As it is, I’m afraid you’re hopeless.”

Mannering grinned, and lit a cigarette.

“I always have been,” he said. “Now — what’s on your mind?”

Plender sat back in his chair, looking more like Punch than ever.

“Of course,” he said, “it’s no business of mine, but — is it the thing, *John, this* new — new . . .”

“Let me say it for you,” suggested Mannering sympathetically. “What’s my game with Lorna Fauntley ? Right?”

“Right.”

“What idea is biting you? Do you think I’m going to try blackmail ?”

Plender grinned. “You were a born fool, J.M. No. I don’t suppose there’s anything you could use against her, anyhow. But her father’s a rich man. You might — I say might — be thinking of . . .”

“Let me help you again,” suggested Mannering. “Cashing in. Marrying for money. Right?”

“Right.”

“You’re a bigger mutt than I, Toby,” said Mannering. “I don’t really know why I don’t collar you two and bang your silly heads together. For the love of Mike stop doing the Victorian father on me, and watch me knock the bottom out of the betting market. Another thing. Use your legal training a little more, and realise the inconsistency of god-damning me when I ride with the Mimi Rayford bunch *and* when I run blamelessly with the daughter of a peer of the realm. Another thing. I’m going to buy five thousand Klobber Diamond Mines shares, and if you want a good thing, get in on that. And, Toby . . .”

“H’m-h’m?” muttered Toby Plender.

“I’m not such a fool as I look.”

Mannering took his leave soon afterwards, smiling to himself. It had been an ordeal, but it was over. Several times he had felt as though Plender *knew,* he chuckled at the fear now, and wondered what Plender would have said if he had known of the raid on the Fauntley strong-room.

Well, he was in it now for better or worse.

A few minutes later Toby Plender rubbed the end of his nose and looked thoughtfully out of the window of his flat after the retreating figure of his friend as he walked up the street.

Twenty years was a long stretch; in twenty years he had known J.M. play the ass to the limit, but he had never known him play the rogue. A smile curved Toby Plender’s square lips.

“He’s leading us by the nose,” he muttered to himself. “All of us. Klobber Diamond Mines . . .”

The Klobber Mines, Plender discovered twenty minutes later, were as nearly defunct as horse-drawn cabs. His informant was Gus Teevens, one of the biggest and most picturesque brokers on the Exchange. Gus was a giant of a man, fat, smooth-faced, innocent to look at, and possessing a deep, rich, unctuous voice that could have swayed a multitude if its owner had so chosen, either in the political arena or in the Church. He had chosen finance as his medium, however, and he used his voice for the benefit of those few friends who sought his advice.

“Plender,” he said solemnly, “don’t buy Klobbers. Klobber himself was a rogue. He died. His mines were a frost. They died. His shares are drawn in pretty colours and look good. Have you ever seen an embalmed body ?”

“So you don’t like the sound of them?” said Plender.

Teevens shook his massive head and wriggled his massive body in the swivel-chair in front of his desk. His office was a large one, furnished barely on the modern principle, but he seemed to fill

it.

"Plender," he said, "you have a fair portion of this world's goods. Cling to it. Whoever was the misguided oaf who in-troduced you to Klobber Diamonds, shun him as you would the plague. Must you go?"

"I must," said Toby Plender, grinning. "What are Klobbers standing at?"

"Shares one pound at par, two-and-threepence on the market."

Plender hesitated. He smiled inwardly as he realised that after trying to dissuade Mannering from gambling he was being tempted to take a chance on Mannering's opinion. He decided to take it, and smiled.

"Then buy me a block of a thousand," he said.

Gus Teevens shook his head sadly, as a man looking on a ruined world.

"Plender," he said, "I have warned you."

"And sell them," said Plender, "when they've reached par."

He left the office of the stockbroker, smiling to himself a little crookedly. No one could have been more definite than Teevens; no one could be more unreliable than Mannering.

In his office Gus Teevens lifted the receiver off one of five telephones and put in a call, later conducting a conversation which might, for all its intelligibility to the layman, have been in a foreign language. Massive and deliberate as ever, Teevens finished his call, then made others on the five telephones. For twenty minutes he was talking, and as the minutes went by his face grew redder, and little bands of sweat gathered on his smooth forehead. In different ways to different people he said, "Buy Klobbers."

Lord Fauntley was in a bad temper one morning shortly after Plender's talk with Gus Teevens. His lordship told himself he had good reason to be annoyed, but his staff sighed when they realised

that the chances of another bad day in the office were strong. He sorted through the post quickly, and then rang for his secretary, Gregory. It was a rule in Fauntley's business life always to open private correspondence himself, for he worked on the basis that no one else could be trusted.

Gregory came in silently, and bowed.

"Good morning, my lord."

"Look here, Gregory" — Fauntley rarely allowed himself to bandy words, about the weather or anything else, with the men who worked for him — "Klobbers. Yesterday they were bad, and to-day . . ."

"Sixteen-and-eightpence, my lord," said Gregory. "Mr Marshall told me himself that he can't buy them lower. They were fourteen-and-three yesterday. Shall we continue to buy, my lord ?"

"Of course, you fool, buy! Buy all you can while they're below par, and then stop. But, listen, Gregory, if I thought you knew anything about this leakage . . ."

Gregory had been secretary to Lord Fauntley too long to take exception to the remark or the manner of it. He was a tall, pale-faced man of fifty, a confirmed bachelor, and a chronic dyspeptic.

"I assure you, my lord, the sharp rise was as much a surprise to me as to you. I was *particularly* careful to issue instructions only to the *safest* of brokers, and I think it can be safely assumed that the leakage in information was through sources *other* than our own. Is there anything else, my Lord ?"

"Oh, get out," muttered Lord Fauntley.

"Shall I send Mr Mannering in, my lord ?"

"Mannering? Oh — oh, yes."

Fauntley summoned a smile, but was not entirely successful in hiding his irritation. It was rare, even for the managing-director of the Fauntley Financial Trust, to find a thing like the Klobber Diamond Mines, and he had expected to get the whole fruit for

himself. The fact that he had been compelled to share it was maddening. His profits were cut from forty thousand to twenty-five thousand, and he was reminding himself that fifteen thousand was a lot of money.

He stopped brooding as a figure darkened the doorway.

"Ha! Come in, Mannering, come in. Glad to see you."

Mannering, immaculate and polished as ever, entered the office, shook hands with his lordship, inquired after her ladyship, and accepted a suggestion that he should dine at Langford Terrace that evening.

Under the warming influence of Mannering's flattery Lord Fauntley confided that he had been stung by some darned cheap-jack of a broker, but, by Jove, he'd be more careful in the future. Then he succeeded in forcing his worries away, and chuckled.

"Still laying heavily on the winners, Mannering?"

Mannering smiled at his lordship's eagerness.

"I was on Tanamount yesterday," he said, "doubled with Portia. But I really came to see you about the stones, Fauntley."

Fauntley swallowed hard. Some thirty years before he had been a clerk in the offices of a Greenwich bookmaker, whose heaviest stakes had rarely topped the hundred pounds. By unquestioned shrewdness he had climbed the backs of the masses to become a financial power, but in many ways he retained the outlook of his early days. He was unable to comprehend the coolness of Mannering in the face of sub-stantial wins and — so far as the peer could see — only occasional losses. Mannering's nonchalance was a thing that Fauntley discussed at any and every opportunity. "An astonishing fellow. Money doesn't matter with him. Ever met him? Come along to my daughter's Carnival Ball — you'll find Mannering there." Or, to his wife: "Amazing fellow, Mannering. Fascinating. And — business with pleasure, m'dear — I think that idea of a ball is a good one. It's time Lorna took a little

interest in her old father, and a lot of people will come: surprising how much can be done at a time like that. Mannering will draw them."

Very often Mannering told himself that he could not have a better publicity-agent, and there was an ironical gleam in his eyes when he wondered what Fauntley's reaction would be if the peer knew just what he was doing.

"Stones?" echoed his lordship, breaking across Mannering's thoughts.

Mannering nodded, as he proffered cigarettes.

"Yes. I've heard that the Lubitz diamonds will be in the market within a week or two, and . . ."

"Lubitz !" Lord Fauntley's eyes glittered. "My heavens, Mannering, but the Lubitz collection *and* the Gabrienne collection would be — would be unique, unique ! You're sure of this?"

"So sure that I thought of buying them," said Mannering.

The peer's face dropped ludicrously.

"Ha! Of course. I'd forgotten you collect. Yes. Well, you won't go far wrong with the Lubitz diamonds, that's certain enough."

"But," said Mannering, frowning a little, "I'm more anxious to get the Gembolt sapphires, and I was thinking . . ."

He stopped, as Lord Fauntley's lips tightened.

The Gembolt sapphires, Fauntley knew, were up for offer at the Garton Sale Rooms, at an auction to be held on the following morning. He, Fauntley, had them in his pocket, since money was tight, and he expected to get them for five or six thousand. But if anyone — Mannering, for instance — was going to bid against him, it would be a different matter.

"I was thinking," Mannering went on, "that if you give me the first refusal of the sapphires I'll see that you get the first chance of the Lubitz collection."

"You will?" Fauntley's eyes sparkled. "But that's damned good

of you, Mannering, damned good! I'll keep away from the Gembolts. Go and get them."

Mannering smiled, and picked up his hat and gloves from the table. If Lord Fauntley could have read the working of the mind behind that smile his own would have been blasted from his face.

Jimmy Randall preferred Somerset to London, but he visited London occasionally, always making a point of seeing Toby Plender. Recently the mutual topic had been John Mannering. On the morning of the 9th of October — the date of the Fauntley Carnival Ball at the Five Arts Hall,

Kensington — the topic was still Mannering, but it was viewed more cheerfully and more philosophically than before.

"It amounts to this," said Plender. "He's found a winning slant, and he's following it blindly. I don't mean horses only; I don't even mean the tables, although I've heard rumours that he's been doing well at Denver's Club and one or two private *salons.* But he's touched two or three things like the Klobber Diamonds, and . . ."

"In other words," said Randall cheerfully, "he's turned his five thousand into fifty, and he can go to hell at his own pace."

Plender laughed, making his face more like Punch than ever.

"I suppose so. I think he must have had something up his sleeve all the time, Jimmy. Anyhow, if you want to borrow anything, try J.M."

"Let's go and drink his health," said Randall. "Y'know, I think if Marie Overndon had the chance now she'd take it."

"Let Marie Overndon," said Plender amiably, "go to perdition. She very nearly . . ."

He broke off abruptly, for one of the first faces he saw as he entered the Junior Carlton was Mannering's. Mannering waved and moved towards them.

"This," he said cheerfully, "must be the seventh postmortem in

as many months. Are you eating or just drinking?"

"We might eat," said Toby Plender.

"Idea," said Kimmy Randall.

"I've got a table," said John Mannering.

The flash of his white teeth against his dark skin, the glint of his hazel eyes, the grace of his lithe body as he moved towards the grill-room of the Junior Carlton, were parts of the Mannering of old, the Mannering of money. The thoughts in his mind were strange and mixed, tinged with a grim humour, coloured by a new devilry and a new purpose.

At that time John Mannering was reputed to be wealthy beyond ordinary measure. While his balance at a certain bank was low, it was well known that he used several banks. While no broker had bought substantially for him in any shares, Klobber Diamonds or others, it was known that he operated through many brokers. While no jewel-merchant had sold him gems of exceptional value, it was known that he traded with many merchants — also, it was rumoured, through Lord Fauntley. Billy Tricker, hearing reports of Mannering's exceptional winnings on the turf, was glad that he had taken his lucky bets elsewhere. Tricker, being a philosophical bookie, knew that his turn would come.

At that time John Mannering's assets were one thousand and fifty pounds, an idea that had grown into an obsession now, a belief in his ability to work the idea, and the love of Lorna Fauntley, of which he was unaware.

No one knew, no one dreamed, that they would soon be meeting the Baron. When the gentleman's exploits grew famous or notorious, according to the point of view, no one dreamed that John Mannering was the Baron.

CHAPTER SIX

RUMOURS AND CRIMES

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR WILLIAM BRISTOW WAS A LARGE-BONED man of medium height and middle age. He had spent twenty-five years in the Force — excepting, of course, for four years in Flanders — and those years were beginning to show in the grey of his grizzled hair and the lines in the corners of his eyes. Apart from those two signs he might have been twenty-eight, not forty-eight. His back was as straight as a rod, his stomach flat, his biceps passably hard, even when relaxed, and his eyes, flinty grey beneath almost white brows, were as keen and shrewd as ever. His lips smiled less often, perhaps, but his eyes laughed more.

At times he was called the Philosopher, because he appeared to let nothing worry him. At other times he was called the Posh William, because he dressed fastidiously, and wore a button-hole on every possible occasion. At other times still he was called the Mug, because every Commissioner selected him for the most difficult, tiring, intricate, and unlikely problems. The imagination of his fellow-officers — and subordinates — at Scotland Yard was not, then, as fertile nor as subtle as it might have been.

There was one compensation, however. Certain members of the fraternity that takes its pleasures and earns its living at the expense of more orderly members of society revealed greater subtlety by calling him Old Bill.

It might have been possible for them to have selected a man more antithetical of Bairnsfather's creation, but few people would have believed it. Bristow's face was square, tight-skinned, and alert, while his moustache was a neat military-cum-Colman attachment. Bristow fingered it a great deal, as though endeavouring to remove the yellow stains of nicotine that soiled the greyness of it. By habit he smoked cigarettes heavily, drank beer a little and spirits usually

by invitation, and shaved night and morning when the trials of his job permitted. The thirty-seven housewives who lived in Gretham Street, Chelsea — excluding his own wife — believed that he was a commercial traveller. He had two sons approaching maturity and a daughter of fifteen. Perhaps one of the most significant things about him was that he adored his wile.

One morning in the August of 1936 Old Bill walked rapidly along Mile End Road, acknowledging an occasional friendly grin from the enemy who were at times his friends, frowning, wishing for winter — or at least for a temperature below seventy-five degrees — and confounding the Dowager Countess of Kenton.

The Countess had lost an emerald brooch valued at seven hundred and fifty pounds. That had been on the Monday, three days before this visit of the Inspector's to Limehouse. At ten o'clock on the night of the loss she had telephoned Scotland Yard to lodge her complaint, and, allowing for the six hours she apparently slept at night, she had telephoned Scotland Yard every other hour afterwards.

The theft had been a neat one, but not exceptionally clever. During a dance — the Dowager had an unattached daughter — the lights had been cut off for thirty seconds, and the brooch had been snatched from the Dowager's corsage. Before she had stopped screaming the lights had been switched on again, whereat she had fainted, and no one had kept a cool head in the ensuing confusion.

A ladder leading to the windows at the rear of No. 7 Portland Square revealed the means of ingress, an unconscious housekeeper near the electric-main switch — which in turn was near the window — revealed the burglar's preparedness to use violence, and the fact that no one of the party had switched the light on again proved the raider, who must have done it himself, to have been of unusual daring and nerve.

The detective liked nerve, and, knowing that the house-keeper

was not badly hurt, was amused. On the third day he disliked the Dowager so much that he was disappointed when Levy Schmidt, a pawnbroker in the Mile End Road, telephoned him to say that a client had tried to pass the Kenton brooch. That is to say, the human element in the detective was disappointed; the official element was pleased.

Bristow turned into the small, ill-lit shop and stood waiting amidst a row of second-hand dresses, a soiled heap of more intimate garments, a collection of cheap clocks, vases, and ornaments. After a few minutes Levy limped into his cubicle, saw his visitor, and lifted his scraggy old hands in dismay.

"Vy, Misther Bristhow, tho thorry, tho thorry! Vy didn't you come in the private entranth, Misther Bristhow ? Come thith vay, thith vay, and mind the stheps — vun — two — three . . ."

Bristow followed the Jew into the grimy parlour at the rear of the pawnshop, and marvelled to himself that a man as rich as Levy Schmidt could live in such filth. He shrugged the thought away. Levy had a perfect right to handle his own money and affairs as he liked; and Levy, moreover, was a valuable informant.

The parlour was as gloomy as it was dismal, despite the brilliance of the sun outside. It was heaped with more second-hand clothes, odd articles of furniture, crockery, and cutlery. Nothing that could be pawned was missing. Mile End patronised Levy frequently and exhaustively from sheer necessity.

"Now vot, Misther Bristhow — thit down, pleath — can I do for you ? Can it be . . ."

"What a lot more you'd say if you didn't talk so much!" said Bristow cheerfully. "The Kenton brooch, Levy. You've got it?"

Levy nodded. His dirty, scrawny face was lined with years, and his brown, hooded eyes gleamed as he regarded the detective with satisfaction. He turned away and limped towards a square steel safe in the corner of the parlour.

“Vy, yeth, Misther Bristhow, vould you pelieve it, I forgot? Mind you,” the pawnbroker added hastily, “I voth forthed to pay ten poundth for it, Inthpector; he vould not leave it viddout a pit of money. You come back ven I haff more in the thafe, I thaid, and he promithed he vould,

Inthpector — just vun minute more. Hey! The Kenton brooch, hey!”

Bristow took the bauble in his fingers and peered at it. The lambent green fires in the stones greeted even the dim light of the shop-parlour. Bristow pulled a photograph from his pocket and compared it with the jewel in his hand. It was the genuine Kenton brooch, he was prepared to swear.

He slipped it into his pocket, wrapped in tissue-paper, and nodded at the Jew.

“That’s it,” he said. “Now who was the man ? Know him ?”

“Never thet eyeth on him before in me life, misther!”

“What did he look like?”

“Veil — it’th dark in the thop, Inthpector. Tall and dark and vot you might call viciouth, hey? Not a nithe man to know, hey? And his coat-collar voth turned up — like thith.” Levy put his scrawny hand behind his neck and hunched his shoulders expressively.

“Coat or overcoat ?” asked Bristow.

“Overcoat, and a day like thith!” Levy lifted his hands to the ceiling. “Vy, didn’t it thout thuthpithion?”

“Why didn’t you telephone for a couple of policemen ?” asked the Inspector a little irritably.

“Veil” — Levy shrugged his shoulders until the miscellaneous collection inside the pocket of his once black, now green coat jingled together — “vot could an old man like me do, Inthpector? Get the brooch, I thaid — that wath the firth thing. And then telephone you, hey?”

Not by a word or sign did Levy betray that he knew more than he said. True, he had given the only description of the visitor he possessed; but Levy had no love for the police, and he had a great love for jewels of the quality of the Kenton stone. Between him and the visitor who had brought the jewel there had passed a conversation that Bristow would have given a lot to have heard.

"I'm not grumbling," the Inspector said, knowing that if he grumbled he would get little or no information. "What was his voice like?"

"Not a nithe voith," said old Levy. "Hard, misther, vid the corner-mouth talk, hey?"

"H'm," said Bristow, and his mind worked automatically.

"An old lag, but not a Londoner, or he'd know Levy. The light business shows his nerve, and he'll probably be known in the Midlands or up north. Broke, or he wouldn't have taken ten pounds and an excuse for the brooch. He won't come back, of course."

"Where's the ticket he signed?" asked the Inspector.

"Vy, yeth, I forgot, vould you pelieve it? Vun moment, Misther Inthpector, vun . . ."

The old Jew's voice quavered away as he waddled out of the parlour towards the shop. Bristow could hear him pulling out a drawer beneath the counter, and heard him muttering to himself. Bristow scowled, trying to sort the thing out in his mind. Levy should have held the man somehow, he told himself.

"Here ve are, here ve are," said Levy, limping down the stairs into the parlour. "Vunny kind of name, Misther Inthpector."

Bristow took it, and looked casually at the signature, little dreaming how often he was to look on the name and curse it. His attention tightened, however, when he saw that the signature was little more than a series of block letters joined together; it suggested illiteracy or cunning — or both.

"H'm," he muttered, "T. Baron. What strikes you as funny

about that, you old gas-bag?"

"Veil," muttered Levy, "veil — high and mighty, vot ? Hey! Just a minute, misther, the thop . . ."

Bristow nodded as he heard footsteps in the shop beyond. He waited for two or three minutes, with growing impatience. Levy was muttering, and the other voice, low-pitched and harsh, was travelling into the parlour, the tone, not the words, being distinguishable. Levy was haggling, and the other was losing his temper. Bristow started to frown. His frown deepened as he heard a shuffle of footsteps and a rapped: "No, you don't. Stay there!"

Bristow stopped scowling. He stood up slowly and fingered the steel of the handcuffs in his pocket. It was absurd, of course, but the probability remained that the would-have-been pawner of the Kenton brooch had returned. Bristow knew that the gods were generous at times, and a fool was bom every minute.

Keeping close to the row of clothes in the passage, and out of sight of the men in the shop, he went up the stairs.

He saw the man suddenly, and grinned. Levy's description had been brief but good. Tall, dark-skinned, with a tweed cap pulled low over his eyes, reaching almost to the bridge of his nose, and the collar of a dilapidated rainproof coat turned up above his chin, the thief of the Kenton brooch — providing the case was as plain as it appeared to be — was staring at Levy, who was crouching back against the wall behind the desk. Bristow could just see the top of Levy's nose and a forelock of white, greasy hair.

"I tell you," Levy was muttering, "that vot I thay ith . . ."

"Can that !" snapped the man in the tweed cap. And then, without the slightest change of expression in his voice, he said, "Bristow, come out of there!"

The silence in the pawnshop could be felt. Bristow himself felt as if he had been punched in the stomach; his wits were wool-gathering, his legs and arms felt weak. He could just hear the soft

breathing of the Jew and the ticking of half a dozen clocks.

"Levy," said the man in the tweed cap, breaking the silence harshly, "you've split to the narks enough, I reckon. Are you religious?"

Levy muttered something deep in his throat. The detective felt a peculiar tightening of the muscles at the pit of his stomach, and a coldness seemed to have spread through the shop, despite the heat of the day. He shivered.

"Because," went on the man in the tweed cap, "unless Bristow decides to come into sight you're going on a long, long journey. So . . ."

Bristow swallowed a lump in his throat and moved forward. Levy was shivering against the wall, and the man in the tweed cap was holding something in his right hand, holding it loosely and pointing it towards the policeman; he seemed to ignore Levy.

"You'll get a heavier sentence for this," said Bristow, keeping his voice steady. "Put that gun away and . . ."

The man lifted the gun. For a moment Bristow's eyes narrowed, but his coldness increased. It all happened in a fraction of a second. Bristow had just time to think in a queer, hazy way of death. . . .

Then something sweet and sickly came through the shop, something that made Bristow gasp and choke and stagger back. He recognised the fumes of ether gas as he heard the thief laugh, a harsh, unpleasant sound that grated, and saw old Levy drop to the floor, falling as though in slow motion on the screen. The Jew's hand clawed the air, his mouth was twisted open. A vague shape loomed in front of Bristow's eyes, and he struggled for a moment in an effort to regain his feet. Then the darkness swallowed him.

The man in the tweed cap ran through the unconscious detective's pockets quickly, found the Kenton brooch and stuffed it into his own pocket, and then hurried out of the shop, his shoulders

hunched and his head buried in the collar of a frayed mackintosh.

And a little later John Mannering chuckled to himself.

As Bristow's sergeant told him some time later, the detective and the pawnbroker might have been on the floor of the shop for hours but for the arrival of a woman who wanted to pledge a pair of boots. She saw the two bodies, and, not being used to such evidence of violence, even in the East End, screamed and rushed into the street, where she was caught and interrogated by a placid policeman a few minutes later.

The policeman investigated, and then started to get things moving; he recognised the Inspector, and knew the slightest error would earn him a sharp rap over the knuckles. Consequently Bristow was revived without loss of time, and the policeman was relieved to find his superior was not seriously gassed.

"Baron!" muttered a sick and furious Detective-Inspector Bristow some two hours later. *"Baron!* It'll be a long time before I forget that name, blast him. Did you find anything. Tanker?"

Sergeant Jacob Tring of the plain-clothes force, known as Tanker because of his slow, ponderous, yet remarkably successful progress in his work, shook his head and regarded the pale face of his chief stolidly.

"Not a thing. Levy was out as much as you, and if it hadn't been for that old woman who went in to pop a pair of boots you might have been there for hours. I shouldn't smoke just yet, chief," Tanker went on. "The innards are made for some things and not for others."

"You go to hell!" said Bristow snappily. "Well, we know something now. Send a call through for the Baron — T. Baron — to every station; get that pawn-ticket run over for fingerprints . . ."

"There ain't no pawn-ticket," said Tanker. He brightened perceptibly as he made the statement, for he was a man cheered by

bad news and depressed by good tidings. “He took it.”

Bristow stared and then swallowed hard. His brow was black, and he started to speak in a way that Tanker had rarely heard before.

“One day I’ll . . .” he growled; and then suddenly and absurdly he laughed.

It was a remarkable thing to do, but Tanker had known his superior for a long time, and was prepared for anything. The sergeant shrugged his shoulders and looked out of the window of Bristow’s small office at the Yard. A tall, lanky, dolelul-looking man was the sergeant, dressed in shiny blue serge, patched but well-polished boots, and, even in the office, a bowler-hat two sizes too large for him. Tanker’s hat was an institution at the Yard.

Bristow was still laughing, and his assistant decided that there was such a thing as too much of a joke. He grunted.

“Levy said you’d got the brooch in your pocket, chief, so we had a look. Nowt, of course. We tested everything in the pockets for prints, but there was none of them there, either.”

“Next time you want to look in my pockets,” said Bristow, checking his laughter, “wait until I’m awake. Has her ladyship been through this morning yet?”

“Twice,” said Tanker.

The smile left Bristow’s face, and he frowned. The cool effrontery of the trick had appealed, suddenly and unfailingly, to his sense of humour, but the task of making a report to the effect that he had actually had possession of the Kenton brooch sobered him. If the Dowager learned that, she would cause a great deal of bother and annoyance. He grew brisk.

“Well,” he said, “what are you standing there for, Tanker?” (Only Superintendents and higher officials called Sergeant Jacob Tring by his real name.) “Get that call out, man.”

The sergeant hurried out of the room, and for a while Bristow

brooded alone. Then he took a deep breath and left his office for that of Superintendent Lynch. He found the Superintendent in, and made his report verbatim. Lynch, large, red-faced, placid, and cheerful, grinned slowly.

"Caught for a sucker, Bristow," he said; "but what'd he stage a show like that for, I wonder ?"

"If I knew," muttered Bristow, "I . . ."

"Ever seen the man before, or anything like him ?" asked Lynch, who rarely wasted time, especially at the start of a case.

You'll find a dozen in any high street east of London."

"Eyes? Complexion? Hair?"

"Eyes and hair covered, complexion dark."

"Voice?"

"Harsh. I'd recognise it *if* I ever heard it again."

"There seems to be a meaning behind that," said Lynch placidly. "What is it. Bill?"

"He disguised his voice as easily as he did his handwriting," said Bristow, "and he took them both away with him when he went."

"Naturally," said Lynch. "You don't seem quite at your best, Bill. What did you say he called himself?"

"Baron. T. Baron," said Bristow.

There was a sudden tightening of the lines at the Superintendent's eyes, and a sudden pursing of his generous lips. Bristow frowned.

Lynch did not speak at once, but his brooding eyes contemplated the Inspector for several seconds.

"Now that," he said at last, "is a very funny thing."

"Levy thought so too," said Bristow.

"But he wasn't thinking what I'm thinking," said Lynch slowly. "Are you feeling all right?"

Old Bill's smile returned to his lips and eyes. He needed no

telling that there was an idea at the back of Lynch's mind, and he had a great regard for the Superintendent's ideas.

"Ye-es. Injured more in the pride than the abdomen. Why?"

Lynch stood up and picked his hat from the peg on the door, placed his thumb and forefinger behind Bristow's neck, and urged the detective into the passage. As they walked along — the Big and Little of It, according to those members of society who had thought of calling Bristow Old Bill — Lynch was saying, in his curiously gentle voice: "It's a funny tiling, a very funny thing, Bill, that we pulled Charlie Dray inside this morning for trying to pass some of the stones from the Kia bracelet. You've heard of the Kia bracelet, Bill ?"

"Ye-es," said Bristow, and then racked his brains. He did not recall the circumstances of the affair, although the name was familiar enough.

"Removed, so cleverly removed," said Lynch, who had a bad habit of trying to be lyrical, "from Mrs Chunnley at the Pertland House Ball last February. Now we come to think of it, the lights went out, Mrs Chunnley felt the bracelet slip from her wrist, and, *sesame*, the lights came on again."

I gather," said Bristow, "that you think there's a connection between the Kia bracelet and the Kenton brooch ?"

"How liberally you were endowed, Bill, with the power of reasoning! Yes, I do. Now we come to think of it — I'm generous, Bill, and include you — the two jobs were as near identical as any we're likely to come across."

"That's true enough," admitted Bristow, frowning.

"Thank you," said Superintendent Lynch with heavy wit. "Now we go back to Charlie Dray — he's at Bow Street, time being — who was trying to pass some of the stones from the Kia bracelet this morning. He said a thing that makes Mr Baron sound very funny."

"Well," said Bristow, when they had tucked themselves into a taxi — Lynch was notoriously lazy — and were humming towards Bow Street, "what about Dray's story?"

"Will you keep quiet a minute?" demanded Lynch testily.

Bristow grinned and was silent. Lynch said nothing more until they were confronting Charlie Dray in the charge-room at Bow Street some twenty minutes later.

Charlie Dray was a weedy, pale-faced, ginger-haired man who had once earned fame as a cracksman of exceptional ability. No lock had been too cunning for his art, and only a domestic quarrel had led to his undoing, for Charlie had been shopped for nearly being unfaithful. After five years' penance he had forsworn married life and his profession, and he earned a living by selling lozenges to football crowds during the winter and ice-cream to race crowds during the summer. Not once during the three years of his freedom had he trespassed against the law, so far as Superintendent Lynch knew. Yet that morning . . .

"Charlie," said Lynch gently, "I've no wish to see you in uniform again, so I want you to spill your story again, and *fully,* to Old Bill and me. Don't laugh, Charlie!"

Dray chuckled; his good-humour was notorious.

"You will have yours, woncha — little joke I mean? Now, listen, if I strike me dead I speak the truth . . ."

"Pardon?" said Lynch politely.

Charlie guffawed. "But, joking apart, sir, wot I told you was *the* nothing but, strike me, Superintendent. Bloke comes to me a month ago and says, "Charlie, I've heard it said you know something about locks." "Then," says I, "you looked up an out-of-date reference-book, mister." "Now," says he, "I wouldn't disturb your morals . . ." "

"Did he say morals, Charlie?" asked Lynch severely. "Did I tell you I was telling you the nothing but?" demanded Charlie

aggrievedly. “Morals he says, and morals I says, because, if you look at it that way, sir, it’s a laugh. Howso. “For anything in the world,” he says, “but I’ve just bought a lot of old safes, and some of ‘em are locked, and I want to open them.” “On the level ?” asks I. “If so I’ll do ‘em.” “On the level,” says he, so we goes along to a place in Brick Street. . .”

“Can you remember the place?” said Lynch. “Eyes shut and three parts over,” said Charlie, “*and* the Izzy who was selling him the safes. “There they are,” he says, “so you can see I’ve bought ‘em. Now I’m going to take them, and you, to a little place in Lambeth, and you can open them for me.” ”

“And you can remember the Lambeth place?” asked Lynch.

“Would I recognise my mother? Sir, we went there, and I opened the safes, and then he takes the locks out . . .”

“Out?” echoed Bill Bristow, who had been listening with an increasing sense of wonder and perturbation.

“I can see,” said Charlie, with dignity, “that you ain’t used to assorting with gentlemen, Inspector. Yes. They were his property, weren’t they, and he could do what he liked. “How’d you do it?” he says, and I shows him, and he tries it a bit himself, and one way and another he picks it up pretty quick.”

“Meaning,” said Bristow heavily, “that you taught him how to pick locks, did you?”

Charlie Dray’s eyes were pools of innocence. “His *own* locks, Mr Bristow.”

“What kind?” asked Lynch.

“Well,” said Charlie cheerfully, “there was a pretty good selection. Eight, I think. There was a Chubb Major and a Yale 20 and half a dozen combinations. He was a dab at ‘em by the time we’d finished. Howso. Two quid, he gives me, and them little things you lifted this morning, Mr Lynch.”

“He *gave* them to you ?” asked Lynch.

Charlie sniffed, but there was a crafty glint in his eyes.

"On the up-and-up and the nothing but, mister. A present, he said, and may there be many more! Now 'ow was I to know — W was any honest man to know . . ."

"Charlie," said Lynch gently, "you're a god-damned liar, and if you don't know what that means you ought to."

The little man's eyes narrowed.

"S'elp me," he muttered uneasily, "I never lifted 'em, mister. I ain't done a job since I came out."

"Seven years," said Lynch dreamily, "for the Kia bracelet. You wouldn't get off with anything less. But I'd do what I could for you, Charlie, if you'll take us to the place where he bought the safes and the place where you unlocked them for him."

"Now, listen," said Charlie Dray earnestly, "I'd do that for a friend like you any day, Mr Lynch."

Lynch turned to a local sergeant, an interested and amused spectator.

"Let me have a man, will you," he said, "to tote this along with us?" As the man turned Lynch grinned at Bristow. "See what I'm driving at?" he asked.

Bristow nodded, and took a case from his pocket.

"Smoke ? If you've done what you always do — left the thing that matters out. . ." he said, "the name of Charlie's friend was Baron."

"So logical," sighed Lynch, "you ought to have been a Frenchman. Ta. Give Charlie one, Bill; give Charlie one."

Several hours later a weary Bristow and a worn-out Lynch returned to Scotland Yard. The temperature during the afternoon had topped the eighty mark, and both men were hot, dusty, thirsty, and disappointed. Charlie Dray's story had been substantiated — up to a point. The second-hand-safe-dealer had certainly sold the safes to a

Mr T. Baron, whose description tallied with that of the man in the tweed cap at Levy's shop. The office-building where the safes had been unlocked and the lessons in lock-breaking had been given was in the hands of house-breakers, and the firm of agents which had let the rooms to the man Baron remembered the man well, but only by name. All the business had been done by post and telephone.

"And Charlie Dray," mused Lynch, "either can't or won't remember much about Baron's face. H'm. Y'know, Bill, I don't believe in hunches, but I've a nasty tickle in the diaphragm over this bloke Baron. He's cool. He's clever. He's well educated . . ."

"But yet he sounded . . ." Bristow hesitated and shrugged. "His voice was . . ."

"You're not well," said Lynch gently. "His voice and his handwriting were disguised. Out of your own mouth, Bill."

Bristow thought, but he did not say what he thought, and it did not altogether concern Mr Baron.

John Mannering told himself that he had every reason to be satisfied with the way things were going. The comparative failure of the raid on the Fauntley strong-room was a thing of the past now, and the thefts of the Kia bracelet and the Kenton bauble had been perfectly managed; others, too, had gone through as easily, and if occasionally he felt the pricking of conscience at the fact that he was robbing men and women whose company and trust he enjoyed, he Forced it away from him. The risks he stood more than made up for the way in which he was playing his double role.

Certainly he did not feel the slightest awkwardness when he met and talked with the Dowager Countess of Kenton; in fact, he told himself that he had given the Dowager such grounds for complaint and discussion that she was in his debt.

At one of the Fauntley dinner-parties-growing larger and more comprehensive week by week — Lady Kenton spied him,

unaccompanied, and buttonholed him. There was nothing she liked better than an attentive male audience, and Mannering was perfect in that respect. His smile as he approached her made her forget her loss, but she remembered it before long.

"And these policemen," she mourned, "they're so helpless, Mr Mannering. That man Bristow — I'm convinced he said something under his breath when I saw him this evening."

"It wouldn't surprise me," admitted Mannering, smiling, "but he's probably doing his best. He's after a clever rogue, and . . ."

"Clever!" snorted Lady Kenton. "Clever! A sneaking, cowardly cat-burglar who robs a poor, helpless woman! Clever! The scoundrel! If I could only find him, Mr Mannering, I'd — I'd . . ."

"Cocktail, m'lady?" said her ladyship's footman. "Dinner in half an hour, m'lady."

Lady Kenton lifted her glass to Mannering, and told herself that he had quite the most fascinating smile she had ever seen. What a lucky girl Lorna Fauntley was, if Loma only knew it!

Lorna moved from a small group of people gathered round the television-set in the corner of the room; her dark hair was still a little unruly, her eyes were still mutinous and still probing, although they cleared as she reached the Dowager and Mannering.

"I was just saying . . ." began the Dowager.

"I believe with a little prompting I could almost guess," laughed Lorna. "It'll be something to do with a burglary . . ."

Lady Kenton looked offended, John Mannering laughed, until the Dowager's frown cleared. Lorna squeezed the older woman's hand and accepted a cocktail.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A TALK WITH A GENTLEMAN

OTHER RUMOURS FLOATED INTO SCOTLAND YARD ABOUT THE man who called himself Baron. An expert safe-breaker whose fingers were still nimble but who was nearing the end of his career volunteered the information that a man in a tweed cap and a long mackintosh had asked for lessons in the cracksman's art. Of course, the old lag said virtuously, he'd called at the wrong house; but Bristow doubted it. Then Red Flannagan, who preferred the modern method of cracking safes with the use of gelignite, admitted that a man in a black suit, wearing a trilby hat pulled down over his eyes, had called on him and suggested lessons. "An' at no correspondence-school prices, neither," said Red. "I told 'im where to go, Bill."

"Don't be familiar," snapped Bill Bristow; "and if you haven't been working and you didn't take his money, how is it you're so flush lately?"

"Yer can't prove nothin'," snarled Red.

That tells me a lot," said Bristow thoughtfully.

He grew a little closer to Baron when Flick Leverson was caught trying to smuggle a little packet of precious stones out of the country. All the gems were stolen property, and Bristow knew that Flick was a fence of high degree. He was elated when he discovered that the bigger stones from the Kia bracelet and the Kenton brooch were in Flick's packet.

"It'll go easier for you," Bristow told the fence, "if you'll give me a description of the man you bought those two things from — and tell me everything you know about him."

"Then it won't go easier for me," said Flick philosophically. "He wore a mask, Bill, a tweed cap, a mackintosh, and rubber-soled shoes. I've never seen him before nor since. I don't know where he

came from."

"What kind of mask?" asked Bristow.

"A handkerchief over his mouth and nose."

"Colour?"

"Blue or black. It was after dark when I saw him."

"How did he know about you ?"

"No idea," said Leverson, and Bristow knew that the fence would not talk a great deal.

"Voice ?" he snapped.

"Up in the air," said Flick. "Squeaky and . . ."

"Oh, damn it!" muttered Old Bill, to the fence's surprise, for Bristow was usually a good-tempered officer.

Whether it was the same man with a different voice, or whether Baron had passed the two pieces of jewellery to someone else for disposal. Old Bill didn't know. He did know, however, that he was beginning to worry about Baron.

Small jewel-robberies were reported to the Yard frequently from various counties, and London's Society suffered considerably from the same trouble. If there was anything remarkable about the thefts, Bristow told himself, it was that they all took place during a dance, dinner-party, or celebration of some kind or other. When he went over them more carefully with Superintendent Lynch he discovered two other things of interest.

The robberies *seemed* to follow the Fauntley family round England. Lord and Lady Fauntley, Lorna, John Mannering, the Dowager Countess of Kenton, and half a dozen other members of the same set were always present. And every time the theft was of a trinket of comparatively small value. No effort was made to take more valuable stones, such as Lady Fauntley's Liska diamond.

"Get all the dope you can," said Lynch, "on the servants of that crowd. It's beginning to look like an inside job, Bill."

"But there's always definite proof that the man came from the

outside," said Bristow.

"*Too* definite," said Lynch. Then, cautiously: "At least, it might be."

Bristow put half a dozen men on to the task of following the history of the various servants, but little came of the investigation. There wasn't a bad record — nor even a suspicious one — in the whole bunch.

"Ah, well," said Lynch phlegmatically, "he'll either give the game up before we get him or he'll go too far."

"That's a useful contribution to the problem," said Bill Bristow. "Wait until he starts on something big."

"Funny thing," said Lynch, "but that's just what I *am* doing."

Mannering was enjoying himself.

He had nothing against Detective-Inspector William Bristow; in fact, the rumours that he had heard from such sources as Red Flannagan, Flick Leverson, Levy Schmidt, and others, favoured the policeman. But some urge, some devilry which possessed him, had tempted him to try the pawnshop trick, in which Levy had been glad to help, for he had seen a way of buying good stuff at low prices, and at the same time proving his good-will towards the police. Levy, Mannering had discovered, was a fence of the highest class, and it was through the Jew that he had his introduction to other members of the profession. He needed the introductions. Not the least difficult part of his new life was the disposal of the gems, while he had realised after the Fauntley strong-room affair that he must have more than a rough knowledge of safes and locks. He prided himself on learning quickly, but the success of the pawnshop affair pleased him as much as that of the small robberies he had contrived at the expense of certain members of society.

Gambling had been in Mannering's blood almost from the moment he had opened his eyes. The years of comparative peace in

Somerset seemed now like a fantastic dream. The game was the thing.

Prior to the birth of the new idea he knew that there had been something lacking in the game. Staking a certain amount of money on a horse or the turn of a wheel had its attractions, but failed to quicken his blood; his own share was passive beyond the signing of cheques. But in this new game there were thrills and to spare. His freedom depended on his own quickness; his livelihood depended on his own thoroughness. It was his wits against the police.

Mannering had weighed everything up before he had started; the handicaps were heavy, but the rewards high. There was money and to spare, if he had the courage and the brains to keep away from the police; but he knew that the odds against beating the law were very much against him. Unless . . .

Unless he could get the police fighting against a shadow; unless he could create two or three different personalities, confront the police with two or three problems, all separate on the surface, but all connected through the man known as the Baron. Could he? Was it possible to set the police — Bristow and Lynch in particular — hunting shadows while he worked ?

It *was* possible, Mannering told himself.

At that time he judged pretty well how much the police knew. He guessed that suspicions had been aroused by the similarity between the house-party crimes, and he knew that the authorities connected the mysterious T. Baron with the Kia and the Kenton baubles. He even suspected that, wherever the Fauntley set moved, so would a member of the Force; the time was here when it would not be safe to use the same method — the brief dousing of the lights, the robbery, and the switching back of the lights, with the resulting confusion. It was necessary, he told himself, to change his methods, if only temporarily. If he persisted with them he realised that the police would start investigating the house-party crimes very

carefully, and sooner or later they would discover the truth.

There was one thing that worried Mannering. Not for a moment was he troubled about using Fauntley as a dupe; most of the man's money had been made during the War years, and Mannering held a very real objection to profiteers of his type. Certainly he would have no scruple at having another attempt at Fauntley himself.

But there was Lorna.

Mannering himself hardly knew what he thought of the girl. On the first few occasions on which he had met her she had intrigued him far more than any musical-comedy actress had ever done. But he was bitter. He thought rarely of Marie Overndon, but the cynicism that had followed the episode at the Manor remained. He told himself that she had spoiled him for serious attachments in the future, come who may.

Lorna was . . . different.

The Fauntley household, he told himself, would remain as his background. Nothing had been put into words, but it was generally accepted that between Lorna and himself there was an understanding, and the belief satisfied Fauntley. Lorna was enigmatical, erratic, and, her father believed, possessed of some foolish introspection which prevented her from giving Mannering a straight answer, but as Mannering had no complaint Lord Fauntley let things slide. His own concern was the making of money and more money, the collecting of precious stones and yet more stones.

The illusion of wealth that Mannering had so carefully created was a powerful one. No one, not even Randall or Plender, suspected that the fantastic turf wins he had made were imaginary, while the affair of the Klobber diamond shares had convinced Plender that Mannering was using his brains to make money, instead of relying on the turn of a wheel or the form of a horse. Mannering laughed to himself when he remembered the Klobber sensation. Actually he

had profited from those supposedly defunct diamond-mines to the tune of a few hundred pounds, but when he had passed on the hint — obtained through a careless word from Fauntley — to Plender, it had done him more good than a substantial monetary profit. It had fostered the illusion of his wealth to such an extent that he almost believed in it himself.

He faced the prospect of the future with a coolness that sometimes made him laugh aloud. The rules were simple. He would take what he could, where he could, from anyone who would not suffer a great deal from the loss. The Dowager Countess of Kenton, who had outlived two husbands, was fabulously wealthy. The owner of the Kia bracelet could have bought gems ten times its value without batting an eye. Others who had contributed to his banking-account were very wealthy themselves. No one suffered, except in pride of possessions, Mannering told himself time and time again, although with Bristow it was his personal pride.

In the first months of his career Mannering had made one or two mistakes that might easily have cost him his freedom, but his carefulness in the matter of his dress and voice had saved him. For one thing, when he had hired Charlie Dray to teach him the elements of safe-breaking, he had not allowed for the possibility of Charlie being an expert pickpocket. Some stones of the Kia bracelet had been neatly pinched. So had Charlie, but fortunately the latter's knowledge of his pupil's appearance had been slight.

Against Charlie Dray Mannering bore a grudge. One day, he promised himself, Charlie would suffer a severe pain in the neck. To Levy Schmidt, on the other hand, Mannering was grateful.

It was inevitable that, in his guise as Mr T. Baron, Mannering should meet and talk with many strange people, most of whom were members of the profession in some way or other. To some he could talk in complete confidence; others created the impression

that if they could get any information on which to turn King's evidence they would do so without the slightest qualms. Mannering was forced to go warily with those he talked to and dealt with, but as lie never gave an address and rarely saw the men more than once or twice — with certain necessary exceptions in whom he believed he could place implicit trust — he did not worry.

It was late in July when he first heard the rumour of the Rosa pearls.

Some three years before the Rosa pearls had been stolen from their rightful owner in America, and since then there had been not the slightest clue to their whereabouts; Randenberg, the victim of the theft, had been amply covered by insurance, but he mourned the Rosa pearls as the prize piece in a collection that rivalled that of Fauntley in England. Mannering had known of this many months before he had thought of turning to cracksmanship for a livelihood, for the Randenbergs had spent two seasons in England, and he had met them several times.

It was a mere whisper of the pearls that came his way when he was trying to dispose of a small ring that he had stolen from an Essex household during a visit. So far as he knew the ring had not been missed. The fence with whom he dealt with very small stuff grinned when he saw the ring; it was higher quality than he usually handled.

"Reckon," he said, paying out promptly, "you'll be after the Rosas one of these days, son."

"What's them ?" Mannering demanded harshly.

" 'E don't even know 'em!" The fence leered, and then for a moment his face grew crafty. "But I reckon Sep Lee knows a lot, if you arsk me. 'Im an' 'is "pusiness"! Pah!"

Mannering, wearing a slouch cap and his inevitable mackintosh, affected to take no notice, but the germ of an idea was in his mind. The Rosa pearls would be worth an immense sum, even

as illegal gems; the man he knew vaguely as Sep Lee might prove interesting. He made certain inquiries, and the more he learned the more he realised the possibility that the fence might be right.

One morning towards the end of that sweltering August Mannering went into the offices of the Severell Trust, a financial syndicate with fingers in most pies, and asked for Mr Septimus Lee. Mannering was recognised by the clerks who received him, and was treated with the respect demanded by a man of his reputed wealth and standing. It was not unusual for wealthy men to visit Septimus Lee, although no one apart from Lee himself and one other knew the purpose of those visits.

Lee was a Jew, a thin, scraggy little man, with a beak of a nose and dark, lank hair. His shrewd eyes peered up at Mannering as the latter sat down, adjusted his trousers fastidiously, and said: "You know me, Mr Lee?"

"Put, of course. Who vould not ?" Lee's smile was unctuous.

Mannering smiled to himself at the compliment, but outwardly ignored it.

"Have you any idea why I called on you ?" he asked quietly.

"Vell . . ." Lee shrugged his shoulders and lifted his hands high. "How should I know, Mr Mannering? So many famous people come to see me, for so many reasons."

Mannering smiled; lights were sparkling in his eyes.

"Mostly to borrow, don't they?"

"Vell" — a smile flitted across the Jew's face and the old eyes gleamed — "sometimes I can oplige vith a little temporary help, yeth? You are in need, Mr Mannering, of such . . ."

Mannering shook his head decisively, and there was a subtle change in the expression in Lee's eyes.

"No. I haven't come to borrow, Mr Lee. I've come about some — rumours, shall we say?"

Mannering spoke casually, but there was a barb in the words.

Lee knew it, and his eyes narrowed. His lined face was expressionless.

"Strange things rumours, yes?"

"So strange that usually it doesn't pay to believe them," said Mannering. "But this one was very intriguing. It concerned the Rosa pearls, Mr Lee."

There was no mistaking Lee's interest now, and there was a hint of alarm in his eyes. It went quickly, and he shrugged his shoulders. "So . . ."

"Now, the Rosa pearls," went on Mannering casually, "were stolen from the Randenbergs, in New York, three years ago. I've heard a rumour — you won't be interested in where it came from, Mr Lee — that they are now in London."

"Ye-esss," murmured Lee.

"Very beautiful things," murmured Mannering. "The rose-tinted queen pearls in the centre and the famous Rosa graduation. Quite the most famous pearls in America, weren't they?"

"Ye-esss," murmured Lee again.

"And there is a certain collector," said Mannering, with a widening smile, "who would be willing to pay good money for them; within reason, of course. Working on the hypothesis that the Rosa pearls were in the market, how much would you think they were worth, Mr Lee ?"

The Jew was rubbing his thumb across the bridge of his nose, and the expression in his eyes was remarkably cunning.

"Veil," he said smoothly, "vorking on that strange hypothesis, my tear Mr Mannering, I might say — twenty thousand pounds."

Mannering's lips twitched at the corners.

"And now carry the hypothesis a little further. Supposing they were available in London as *stolen* property, and not in the open market? How much then, Mr Lee?"

Septimus Lee spread his blue-veined hands across his desk,

and peered into Mannering's laughing eyes. He was on his guard, Mannering knew: their swords were crossed.

"Vell — should ve say fifteen thousand ?"

"A little high," said Mannering judicially. "If I — of course I'm no expert in pearls, Mr Lee — but if I were to estimate a figure for the Rosa pearls in those circumstances I shouldn't go a pound higher than twelve thousand five hundred."

"No?"

"Not a pound."

Lee took his hands from his desk, and rubbed them together with a faint sliding noise. His eyes were half closed.

"Perhaps twelve thousand five hundred, Mr Mannering, *and* a percentage of commission for the middle-man, eh?"

"Come," said Mannering cheerfully, "I'm assuming that only two people would know anything about the sale — the two principals. Would that figure be — er — acceptable, do you think?"

For a moment there was no sound nor movement in the room. Then Lee bent forward, with a little exclamation.

"Just how much do you know, Mr Mannering?"

"Just as much as I seem to," said Mannering. The smile was still on his lips, but it had gone from his eyes. "You have the Rosas, Mr Lee. No one besides yourself and one other knows they are in England."

"Two others," said Lee thoughtfully. "My colleague — and yourself."

Mannering nodded, and the laughter came back to his eyes; he had made his final thrust and scored well.

"Yes, of course. But I didn't *know* until you confirmed it, Mr Lee. Shall I lay all my cards on the table?"

"It is an idea," admitted Lee.

"H'm. Well, I was one of many who were prepared to purchase the Rosa pearls from the Randenbergs, and one of many

who were disappointed when they were stolen. A friend of mine in America whispered — just whispered, Mr Lee — that sometimes you were in possession of gems which had — er — left the United States, and I put two and two together."

"Because you were still interested in them?"

"Precisely."

"Vell," said the Jew slowly, "I vill not ask questions, Mr Mannering, although it would seem that you have strange friends. Just the one question I would ask. You are acquainted with the police?"

Mannering's expression did not change.

"I am a collector of precious stones, Mr Lee."

The Jew seemed to think for a moment. His eyes closed and his fingers intertwined slowly, tenuously. At last: "This twelve thousand five hundred pounds, Mr Mannering. The transaction would be cash, of course?"

"My cheque is as good as cash," said Mannering.

"Ye-es, of course. But in transactions of this kind . . ."

"Mr Lee," said Mannering gently, "I have every respect for you and your methods, but I would not bring twelve thousand pounds in cash into your office or your home for any purpose whatsoever. I heard a rumour that you have the pearls. Others might hear it too. My cheque against the Rosas."

Again Lee seemed to lose himself in his thoughts, and there was silence for several minutes. He came out of his reverie, and nodded. Quick decisions, he knew, were essential.

"Shall we consider the matter settled ?"

"Time and place?" asked Mannering.

"These offices, Mr Mannering, to-morrow, at twelve noon."

"To-morrow is all right," said Mannering, "but twelve is too late. Ten o'clock . . ."

"Must it be so early?" Lee questioned.

“I shall be leaving London soon after eleven,” said Mannering. “If you care to leave it until next week . . .”

Lee shook his head, as Mannering had expected. Lee was not a man to keep a deal of this nature hanging fire.

“Ten o’clock, then,” the Jew said.

“Excellent,” said Mannering.

A few minutes later he took his leave of the financier, knowing that both of them were — so far — well satisfied with the interview. Mannering perhaps with more justification than the other.

Septimus Lee was a clever man, but there were things he did not know. He was unaware, for instance, that he was followed for the rest of the day by a man he would not have recognised even if he had seen him.

Mannering had little faith in disguises, but a beard was a simple arrangement, and he was not likely to be examined carefully while he affected it. His chief complaint was that it made his face hot and sticky, for the weather was still warm, but he bore the discomfort philosophically.

Septimus Lee went from the offices of the Severell Trust, in the Strand, to a safe-deposit in Southampton Row. He travelled in a Daimler saloon that purred through the evening traffic, while Mannering, bearded and in a Frazer-Nash, kept it in sight. Just for a moment, when the little Jew stepped out of the Daimler outside the deposit, Mannering thought he had slipped up. Then he smiled. Septimus Lee was too careful to hold the deposit-key under his own name.

But it was clever, Mannering admitted. The only likeness between the Jew who had stepped into the Daimler and the Jew who had stepped out of it was in stature. The first man had been old and wrinkled, while the second appeared to be young and

smooth-faced. It was a remarkable transformation, and had he not actually followed the Daimler Mannering would never have recognised Lee in his disguise.

After twenty minutes Lee reappeared, and the Daimler moved off. In the brief interval Mannering had hurried to a near-by garage and complained that his Frazer-Nash was going badly, leaving the two-seater for repair while hiring a Vauxhall-Six. After leaving the garage at the wheel of the larger car Mannering also changed his beard for a heavy moustache typical of the Victorian era. No matter how keen Septimus Lee's eyes were he could not have suspected the identity of the driver of the Vauxhall which left the kerb a moment after the Daimler.

The rest of the chase was uneventful. Septimus Lee owned a small house standing in its own grounds on the edge of Streatham Common. Mannering watched the chauffeur garage the Daimler and smiled to himself when he saw the stooping figure of the real Septimus Lee approach the front-door of the house. A clever old scoundrel was Septimus Lee.

Mannering drove back to town thoughtfully. It was just possible, of course, that Lee had not collected the Rosa pearls from the safe-deposit, but it was reasonable to assume that he had, and that for the one night they would be at his Streatham house. That, at all events, was what Mannering had tried to ensure by insisting on the early hour for the deal. If he had agreed to the midday appointment Lee could have got the Rosas in the morning.

For the first time since the Fauntley affair Mannering was faced with the task of breaking into a house and cracking a crib. In a way it was his real d£but; before he had known the strong-room and combination of the safe. Moreover, it was a long time ago, and his preparation had been absurdly inadequate. Now at least he had the rudiments of the craft at his finger-tips.

He had chosen his baptism carefully. If by any chance he was

caught, it would be in circumstances that would make it impossible — or at least unlikely — for Lee to call the police.

But he did not propose to let Lee catch him. Unless . . .

Mannering was worried. He admitted it to himself as he let himself into his flat and foraged in the kitchenette for a light meal. There was something too easy about the affair. There was a catch in it somewhere, known only by Septimus Lee. What was it?

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ROSA PEARLS

MANNERING FELT EASIER, FIVE HOURS LATER, WHEN HE HAD finished his inspection of the windows and the doors on the ground-floor of Septimus Lee's house. Every window was shut and locked; every door was bolted. Obviously Lee was taking no chances, and Mannering was glad that his entry would not be too easy.

Using a pick-lock with a facility that would have earned the admiration of Charlie Dray, he made short work of the door of the kitchen-quarters. A row of trees at the edge of the garden afforded him excellent cover, and the rumble of an occasional night tram on the main road was the only thing that broke the silence.

The lock was only the first task. The bolts remained, and they were likely to be much more difficult. Mannering took a small chisel from the assortment of tools in his pockets and chipped a fragment of wood from the door. After ten minutes lie had bared the bolts sufficiently to get a purchase on them with a pair of thin-mawed pincers. He replaced the chisel and fingered the pincers. Something he could not explain warned him against using them. He felt that trouble would result; he sensed again the peculiar premonition that had worried him after he had traced Septimus Lee to and from the safe-deposit. It was absurd, but it was there.

Mannering breathed hard, and replaced the pincers. He must take every precaution, for the slightest slip would mean failure. He took his small pocket-lamp and stabbed a pencil of light at the top bolt. It looked innocent enough, but he repeated the action with the bottom bolt.

Then his eyes narrowed, and he smiled, without humour.

"I wonder who's the patron saint of cracksmen ?" he muttered. "Wired up, all nicely set for an alarm."

There was no doubt about it. A thin piece of wire ran along

the bolt, the wire of an electric burglar-alarm. It was something for which he had not been prepared, and for a moment he was nonplussed.

"But I should have expected it," he muttered. "Well, there's a way of getting round that difficulty, but I can't think of it. If the door's opened, or if the bolts are drawn back, there'll be the devil to pay. That is to say, if the bolts are drawn while the alarm-wires are connected. But if they're broken . . ."

He smiled with more humour, and shrugged his shoulders. It would have been more satisfactory if he could have entered the house without spending time in cutting through the steel bolts, but the job had to be done. Fitting a thin, well-oiled blade to the handle of his outfit, he started work on the bolts. There was no sound beyond a low-pitched *burr* as the saw worked. Still the night trams rattled along the high road, and the trees afforded him complete shelter.

Ten minutes — fifteen — twenty minutes.

He was beginning to sweat, and his thumb and fingers were stiff with the constant movement, but the top bolt was through at last, and the wire parted with it. The bottom bolt was easier; all that needed cutting was the electric wire, which he could see as he looked downward. Less than five minutes sufficed. Then he used the pincers and drew the bolt back, slowly, carefully.

No sound came.

Mannering was breathing hard through clenched teeth. Once he stubbed his foot against the door, and the rumble that followed sounded like thunder. He waited, his heart beating fast, but there was no movement inside the house.

He used the pick-lock again. The lock clicked open, and he turned the handle. It squeaked a little, and he went rigid for a moment, only to curse his own nervousness. Then he pushed the door open. . . .

His heart seemed to stop as he peered into the darkness of the room beyond!

Something glowed, green and fierce, through the darkness. There was no sound, but two points of fire were there, unwinking. His hands seemed to freeze on the handle of the door, and his body went taut. The smile that curved his lips was frozen too.

"A dog," he muttered, "and a well-trained one. Remember — electric alarms and dogs. I don't mind breaking the alarm, but. . ."

He shrugged, and his heart beat more evenly. The dog still glared at him, without making a sound. Mannering dropped his hand into his pocket and drew out the gun he had used on Detective-Inspector Bristow a few weeks before. It was loaded with concentrated ether gas, reckoned to create unconsciousness quicker than anything else he could conveniently — and safely — use.

Mannering knew that he was taking a big chance. Unless he was within a foot of the dog the gas would be slow in its effect — and Mannering needed speed. But if he went too close the brute would probably jump at him.

"It's worth it," he muttered. "Now . . ."

With his gun-arm outstretched he went forward. The eyes did not flicker, but the rumbling in the throat of the brute warned him of the coming leap. The green eyes moved . . .

Mannering touched the trigger.

There was the slight hiss of the escaping gas and a choking gasp from the dog as it came at him. Just for a moment he was afraid that he had failed, but the outstretched legs were stiff when they touched him; there was a dull thud as the brute dropped down.

Mannering was hot, then cold, as the perspiration on his head and neck cooled in the keen night air. He shivered several times, and had to clench his teeth to stop himself. But there was a gleam in his eyes, a wild, exultant beating in his heart. He was through!

Carefully and silently he closed the door behind him and

dragged a curtain over the single window of the room. The distant lights of the high road were shut out. For a moment Mannering stood in the black darkness. Then the pencil of light from his torch stabbed out, and went eerily round the room until he found the electric-light switch, and flooded the room with light.

His first glance was for the dog. It was breathing softly and regularly, its great mouth gaping a little to show sharp, white teeth, its eyes closed. He wondered that it had kept so quiet; when he saw it was a Great Dane he knew why. But for the ether gas he would have stood little chance; the dog would have brought him down and kept him down with hardly a sound; they were quiet beasts, easy to train.

The slightest of grim smiles lit Mannering's eyes. Mr Septimus Lee was certainly a man in a thousand; he had even trained his dog to tackle an intruder in silence. It seemed that he was prepared for night-attacks on the house, and he was equally prepared to keep knowledge of them from the police, who might have been alarmed by the baying of the Dane. Lee wanted no inquiries, Mannering guessed, and his admiration for the Jew's shrewdness increased.

The darkness of the rest of the house was appalling and Mannering dared not switch on the lights, for he had no idea whether the curtains were drawn, and there was no time to waste in trying each window. He kept the white beam of his torch trained towards the ground, where it would prevent him from stumbling on any unseen obstacle, while being invisible from outside.

It took him five minutes to locate Septimus Lee's bedroom, a large, airy chamber on the second — and top — floor. The door was unlocked — the easiest job he had had so far.

For the first time Mannering used his mask, a dark-blue cloth that covered his mouth, chin, and nose, and he pulled on thin rubber gloves to make sure that he left no fingerprints. A silent, shadowy figure, he crept into the room and reached the bed. The

Jew was sleeping on his back, with one crooked arm over the coverlet, the other hand at the back of his neck.

Mannering used his gas-pistol quickly, regulating the gas this time; the only effect it appeared to have was to make Lee breathe more deeply, and the Jew's body seemed to shrink back into the bed.

"Peautiful!" murmured Mannering, emphasising the "p". His heart was beating fast now, and his eyes were glistening; he was more than half-way to success.

Rapidly he ran through the man's clothes, searching for keys. If he could find them it would save him a great deal of time — and time had never been so precious.

Nothing that might have opened the safe was there, however. He rubbed his chin disappointedly as he looked round the room, but his eyes glinted when he saw a small deed-box resting on a chair near the bed.

Using a pick-lock, he opened the lock of the box without any trouble, and found what he was expecting to find — a bunch of intricately cut keys. He smiled, jubilant again.

Now for the safe.

There was a peculiar feeling of depression in Mannering's breast a few seconds later. He had told himself that he was thoroughly prepared for the sterner tasks o his newly chosen profession, but the affairs of that night proved how badly he had misjudged the difficulties. To get into a house was one thing. To get into it without the vaguest notion of where to find the safe was another. In future, he told himself, he must prepare the ground more thoroughly beforehand. For the time being — where was the safe ?

A wall-safe, almost certainly, and in the bedroom. Lee was not a man to keep valuables in another part of the house at night.

Mannering tried every picture, to find the blank wall behind

them. The feeling of depression grew heavier — until he looked intently at the bed, the last possible place. And then that curve at the corners of his lips came, and his eyes gleamed.

Septimus Lee's bed was a double one, with a large head-panel of walnut, very close to the wall. Mannering went to it, bent over the unconscious figure of the Jew, and examined the centre of the panel. It was very intricately carved — too intricately carved for its purpose. Mannering ran his fingers — gloved fingers — over the smooth surface. Luck was with him. There came the slightest of clicks! And the centre of the panel began to slide . . .

And then the shock came!

The room, the house, was filled with noise, the strident clatter of a low-pitched electric alarm. The very air seemed to shiver with the sound. For a split second Mannering stood still, his muscles tensed, his lips compressed. Then, above the alarm, came the sudden banging of a door!

Mannering looked at the window of the bedroom and resisted the biggest temptation of his life. A few seconds, a climb down the walls of the house, would mean freedom, escape. But escape, he told himself, without the Rosa pearls. . . .

The temptation, the thought, and the first ringing of the alarm took no longer than a few seconds. It seemed almost in one movement that Mannering stiffened and then leapt towards the unlocked door. The key was on the inside, thank God! Mannering turned it as footsteps echoed along the passage outside. Before the cracksman had reached the head of the bed again there was a thud on the door, and a low-pitched voice came through to the room.

"Mr Lee — you all right, Mr Lee?"

Mannering ignored it. He tried key after key in the lock of the safe, quickly but with steady fingers; the filth one opened it. He was still laced with the combination beyond the first door, and as the thudding on the door grew louder he told himself that he would

have to give up. Desperately now he twisted the knob, right, left, right again, hearing the numbers clicking, working with raging impatience, not knowing whether he was close to his goal or not. Suddenly there was a loud click, and with new hope he pulled at the door.

It opened!

But Mannering's satisfaction was tinged with anxiety; even though success was near he was not out of the wood yet.

The man outside had stopped calling, but another, more ominous sound came. A second key was being poked through the keyhole. As Mannering turned round he saw the first key moving slowly, drooping towards the floor.

Another mistake! The realisation flashed through his mind as he crossed the room again. He should have put something heavy against the door when he had locked it; he should have been prepared for this development. Now it would be touch-and-go whether he succeeded or not.

He pressed his left side against the door and stretched out for a stiff-backed chair with his right arm. As the door thudded against him he pulled the chair into position, jabbing its top rail beneath the knob of the door. In the respite that followed he pulled a heavy arm-chair from a corner of the room and upturned it, leaving its weight to support the first chair.

"Three minutes, with luck," he muttered, *sotto voce.* There was a queer relief in talking to himself, and he kept murmuring under his breath as he worked.

He reached the open safe again and searched for the contents. There were several bundles of papers, one or two small trinkets, and a leather case. The case was locked, but by now Mannering had finished with finesse. He took a screwdriver from his pocket and forced the hinges from the leather, snapping them off.

The lustre of pearls shone for a moment in the dim light of the

room. . . .

The excitement was almost too much for him, but he resisted the temptation to stare at his prize. The Rosa pearls were his, but the danger was still about him. He stuffed the case in his pocket, while his eyes were glistening and his lips parted. Quickly he moved towards the window. It was shut and locked, but he opened it without trouble, and looked below. To the garden it was a fair drop, but a drain-pipe and a sill at the window beneath promised foothold. Mannering climbed out quickly.

Even to the last his luck — and his caution — held.

As he went down, easily enough, he kept his ears wide-open for the slightest sound. For a few moments there was silence; then something moved beneath him. He turned his head in time to see the burly figure of a man waiting in the shadow of the trees that had befriended him, Mannering, a short while before.

There was trouble both ways now, and Mannering had to fight hard to keep his self-control. One thing was certain: he had to get down.

As he went, cautiously, his coat caught round the drainpipe, and the temporary delay gave him an idea. At the next staple he stopped again, tugging at his coat. He was within a few feet of the ground now, and he judged that the man in the shadows would come forward, believing the climber to be in his power.

Mannering judged rightly. The man ran towards the figure on the wall, and Mannering waited, timing his backward jump to a nicety. With every muscle in his body taut, he went down!

The man did not see the manoeuvre until it was too late to avoid the crushing weight. Mannering dropped plumb on to the other's head and shoulders! The man crumpled up, and Mannering went flying, turning his shoulder to the ground as he fell. He took the fall well, and scrambled breathlessly to his feet. The other was scrabbling the gravel path with his feet and moaning.

“Knocked out,” muttered Mannering. He told himself, forcing down a fear that there was anything more the matter with the victim of his attack than temporary unconsciousness, that it was the last time he would break into a place without knowing just how many occupants it was likely to have. But it was over; now for the car.

He ran lightly towards the spot where he had left the hired Vauxhall, keeping his eyes open all the time in ease there was a third member of Septimus Lee’s house-guard. He saw no one.

The engine of the Vauxhall purred sweetly as he pressed the self-starter, and the wheels turned.

Sweat oozed from every pore in his body. His breath was coming, short and harsh, between his parted lips. His head was buzzing, and his limbs were trembling. Mannering felt that he had gone through the worst five minutes of intense action that a man could possibly endure; yet he had succeeded.

And then, as he turned the Vauxhall off the common road towards the main road and looked into the driving-mirror, he groaned.

You fool !” he muttered. *“You fool!”*

But he was laughing a moment later. Right to the last he had made mistakes — even as he had turned into the high road he had been wearing his mask! He slipped it off, and took a cigarette from the dashboard-pocket with lingers that trembled.

And then he settled down to the task of getting home.

CHAPTER NINE

SEPTIMUS LEE AND ANOTHER

AT FTVE MINUTES TO TEN ON THE FOLLOWING MORNING THE same suave-voiced clerk received the same immaculate, smiling John Mannering, and ushered him into the office of Mr Septimus Lee. The Jew's blue-veined hands were pressed together, with the skinny fingers intertwining.

The lids of his large, slant-set eyes were a little lower, if anything, than on the previous day, but otherwise he looked the same, was dressed the same, and smiled as invitingly.

"Clever," murmured Mannering to himself, "and cool. I'd give half the Rosa pearls, nevertheless, to know what's going on in his mind."

He spoke amiably, however.

"Well, Mr Lee. Need we use a theoretical basis for discussion to-day, or can we . . ."

Lee waved his hands.

"We understand each other, understand each other perfectly, Mr Mannering. But for one unfortunate mishap our deal could be completed to-day . . ."

Mannering's brow went up.

"Mishap?" he questioned.

"Regrettably, yes." Septimus Lee lifted his hands, chin-high, and shrugged his shoulders, but there was no quiver in his voice. "I had — er — visitors last night, Mr Mannering."

Lee paused. Mannering's eyes widened, his lace-muscles relaxed. The suggestion of incredulity he created was convincing even from Septimus Lee's point of view.

"Visitors?" His voice was hard. You mean someone made a better offer than mine?"

"No offer at all," said Lee. "I was robbed."

“Robbed?” Mannering uttered the single word with emphatic scepticism.

“Yes — last night of all nights,” said the Jew softly.

A frown crossed Mannering’s lace. His chin was a shade more aggressive than it had been a minute before, and his voice was harder.

“If this is what you call bargaining finesse, Mr Lee, I’m sorry you take me for that sort of mug. I’m disappointed in you.”

Lee smiled, and once more Mannering was forced to admire him.

“A very natural supposition,” said the Jew, “but an erroneous one, Mr Mannering. However, as I cannot show you the Rosa pearls, there is little point in continuing the interview.”

“Look here” — Mannering realised that he could not stress his disbelief too much — “I’m willing to go a little higher with my offer. Shall we say thirteen thousand pounds, and make the deal ?”

“I can quite understand your point of view,” said Septimus Lee, “and I sympathise with you. You are a collector, and you reckoned to have a rare — a unique — piece; but you have been balked. My apologies could not be more sincere, Mr Mannering, but I was robbed.”

Mannering stared at him for a moment, and then rubbed his chin ruefully.

“Damn it,” he said, “I believe it’s the truth after all! But, hang it, Mr Lee, only you and I and one other in England knew of the existence of the necklace. It seems absurd . . .”

“My own mpression exactly,” said Lee. His tone was silky, and there was an undercurrent of something in his voice which Mannering did not understand. Yet robbed I was. Of course others may have heard the same rumour as you. And now, if you will excuse me . . .”

Mannering shrugged, smiled, picked up his hat and gloves,

and was ushered out of the office by the clerk, who had arrived in answer to Lee's ring. That was over.

"Now what," asked Mannering of himself as he walked into the Strand beneath the white glare of the sun does Mr Lee know — or guess ? I'm not happy in my mind about that man. And there was something different about him to-day. He was keeping himself in check, of course, but there was something else."

Two things happened in the next two minutes that told Mannering what he wanted to know. They were both innocent things, and directly connected with each other, but connected in no way with the Baron or Septimus Lee. But . . .

"Middie speshais!" bellowed a newspaper-seller in his ear.

"Midday specials," came another voice, a few moments later.

The difference in the two voices was ludicrous. Mannering looked at both men. The one was old, sharp-featured, and dressed in dirty rags; the other was younger dressed poorly but neatly, and with a rather intelligent lace; disillusioned perhaps, but intelligent.

"As different to look at," he thought, "as they sounded different. *Sounded different . . .*"

He bought a *Standard* from the younger man and walked on, smiling. Had it been later in the day the news-seller might have wondered how much Mannering had won, for he looked pleased with himself and with life. He *was* pleased. The voice of Septimus Lee. that day, had been different from the voice on the previous day. There had been little or no accent, while before there had been a definite Jewish inflection, more difficulty with the *w's* and *s's.*

"So he changes his voice," thought Mannering, "to suit himself. Strange."

Half an hour later he thought it stranger still.

He was looking at the Rosa pearls, wondering how to dispose of them and whether it was the genuine string. He was faced

immediately with two of the major problems of his new life — how to sell what he had stolen, and how to make sure that he had genuine stones, not artificial ones.

There was a connection between the two problems, he knew. Once he found a reliable buyer — or fence — he would also find a reliable judge — a man who would not purchase dud stuff as the genuine article. It was not altogether satisfactory, but for the time being it would serve.

He remembered Flick Leverson, who had purchased one or two small trinkets from him before his. Flick's, unfortunate apprehension by Bill Bristow.

"I can take the small stuff," Flick had told him, "but if you ever get any big stuff don't try me; try Levy Schmidt."

Mannering had smiled at the time, for Levy had recommended Flick. Moreover, he had been warned by several gentlemen of the fraternity to avoid Levy Schmidt like the plague. Levy was reputed to be a police-informer. Mannering had said as much.

"He's a snout," Flick Leverson had admitted, "on the little boys, bo'. He puts the dicks on to the rats while he gets away with the big boys himself. You take my word for it. Levy Schmidt's all right if your stuff's big."

Mannering had tried Levy out with the Kenton brooch. Contrary to Detective-Inspector Bristow's belief. Levy had not given the tweed-capped man away; he had played a part, suggested by Mannering, that had completely hoodwinked the detective. In other words. Flick Leverson had been right.

Mannering naturally thought of Levy Schmidt in connection with the Rosa pearls. Levy would probably refuse to part with more than live thousand pounds for them, but at that time Mannering's exchequer was in sad need of replenishment. He would rather sell to Levy at half the value (illegal value) of the pearls, and get his cash immediately, than wait until he found someone with whom he

could deal direct. In any event, direct dealing in a case like this might have unforeseen results; it was foolish to take undue risks.

"Levy it is," said Mannering, leaving the pearls on the table while he brewed himself tea at the service-flat which he used as a place of retreat. John Mannering, man-about-town, lived at the Elan Hotel, for the sake of his reputation.

"Levy it shall be," he said, as he drank the tea. "Levy to-night," he murmured tunefully, for he was still very pleased with the success of his raid on the previous night.

And then he became very thoughtful.

At eight o'clock that night a man in a tweed cap waited near Levy Schmidt's pawnshop in the Mile End Road until the pawnbroker, grey and bent and weary-looking, left his shop, locked it, and began to walk slowly towards the nearest tram-stop. The man in the tweed cap followed him, even on to a tram travelling towards Aldgate. At Aldgate Levy clambered off it awkwardly, and the man with the tweed cap jumped off in time to see Levy disappear into that most unlikely of places — the Oriem Turkish Baths.

The man in the tweed cap waited on a corner opposite the baths, from where he could see both entrances to the building. Twice a policeman viewed him suspiciously, and once he looked frankly into the constable's face, to avoid suspicion.

"Fixture, ain't I ?" he said. "She works over there. Oughter be out soon."

The bobby smiled to himself sentimentally and walked on.

Ten minutes later a Daimler car drew up outside the Oriem Turkish Baths, chauffeured by a burly man in a peaked cap and a blue uniform. Five minutes later still Mr Septimus Lee left the Oriem Turkish Baths and hurried to the Daimler. The Daimler moved off into the stream of traffic going towards the City.

"Now that," muttered the man in the tweed cap, pulling its

peak farther over his face and slouching towards a bus, apparently forgetful of "she", "is a beautiful piece of luck. If you don't do well at this game, J.M., it'll be your own darned fault."

For Septimus Lee and Levy Schmidt were one and the same!

Mannering had made a list of receivers of stolen goods — known in the vernacular as "fences" and by Flick Leverson's more up-to-date colloquialism as "smashers" — supplied by that philosophical fence, for Flick had realised that it was possible he would be nobbled, and his fears had been justified. Mannering had little desire to try these men with the stuff — or, to use Flick's term again, the "sparks" — that was being watched for by the police. Others besides Levy

Schmidt might be informers on big stuff or small; and, n any case, he could not expect such co-operation from them as he had received from Levy.

His discovery of the Jew's dual personality intrigued him. The man's cunning was astonishing — and too thorough, the Baron decided, to be matched — yet.

As pawnbroker and fence Lee would be waiting warily for the Rosa pearls; as the financial head of the Severell Trust he would probably be watching Mannering carefully. Mannering was not, in those first months, sure enough of the effectiveness of his tweed-cap disguise, even with variations, to try it out again with Lee as Levy. So it had to be someone else.

Mannering decided to try a warehouse-owner by the name of Grayson, a pink-and-white doll of a man with a devastating bass voice. Grayson controlled two or three coastal steamers which disgorged goods at his East End warehouse and carried other cargoes to the North of England and occasionally to Holland. He was able to smuggle stolen goods from one country to the other, and Flick Leverson had said: "He'll swindle you. Levy's a tight

swine, but Grayson will do you down worse than Levy. But he's straight."

A tribute, Mannering had thought, to the honour among thieves that he would put to the test.

Three days later the robbery at Septimus Lee's house a swarthy, big muscled man visited the warehouse offices of Grayson — Dicker Grayson — and asked for the boss. In view of the many sides to his business Grayson made a point of interviewing all callers, and the big-muscled man was admitted to his private office.

"Well?" boomed Grayson. "What d'you want? A job?"

The other shook his head. His brown eyes — hazel eyes — looked sullen, and he spoke gruffly and awkwardly, as though suffering from a slight impediment. He looked a man who was frightened of a coming trick, and certainly no one — not even Randall — would have recognised him as John Mannering.

"No," he muttered; "I've come from Flick. Know Flick?"

Grayson's little eyes narrowed. His pump hands tightened on the arms of his chair, for he knew a man from Flick Leverson could mean only one thing.

Mannering was conscious of a keen scrutiny; Grayson was at once trying to remember whether he had ever seen him before and making sure that he would always recognise him in the future. Beneath that pink-and-white face and those small puffy eyes was a mind at once shrewd and alert.

"Never seen him in my life," thought Grayson. "A North Countryman, by his voice. Fat face, full lips — don't fit in with his eyes, somehow, although perhaps they do." He was quiet for a moment, deliberately trying the other's nerve, but the big man seemed prepared to stare him out for ever.

"What do you want from Flick?" he demanded at last.

"He's gone away for a year or two," The big-muscled man grinned suddenly, and then that furtive, half-fearful expression

returned to his face. “Listen, Mr Grayson — Flick said you’d buy some stuff from me. I’m stuck. Got me?”

Grayson nodded, and his grin widened. He did not doubt the man’s genuineness, for Flick Leverson was a straight dealer; arrested or not, he would never have turned copper’s nark. Moreover, something seemed to tell Grayson that this man would take very little for his goods.

“What is it ?” he demanded.

“You’re on the level?” The swarthy man’s eyes narrowed; his fear was very evident now.

“You know I am or you wouldn’t have come to me,” said Grayson.

The other seemed satisfied by the bluntness of the assurance, and pulled an oilskin bag from his fob-pocket. He dropped it on the desk in front of the fence, and Grayson opened it, expecting to find the proceeds of a smash-and-grab raid or a “snatch”. When he saw the first thing — a pearl ear-ring which had adorned the ear of Lady Dane Fullarth a few weeks before — the fat man’s eyes widened. When he saw the second, a scintillating diamond pendant strung on platinum links, his eyes bulged. When he saw the third, a sapphire ring with a centre stone as large as Grayson’s little finger-nail, he gasped, startled out of his calm.

“Where’d you get these ?” His voice, for once, was low.

The dark-faced man looked ugly.

“That’s my pigeon, mister. Are you buying or aren’t you? That’s all I wanter know.”

Grayson swallowed hard. He ran through the remainder of the stuff, and reckoned quickly that he would sell them for two thousand, perhaps five hundred more. The seller was frightened and in need of money. He calculated swiftly, his one concern not to offer too much.

“I’ll give you two-fifty,” he said.

The man didn't speak, and the silence dragged.

"Well ?" snapped the fence.

"Why, sure," said the big-muscled man, standing up and stretching his hand out for the bag. "I'll find someone who'll like 'em as a present, mister. Deal's off."

In that moment Grayson saw two things. One, the man wore gloves, to make sure that no one saw his bare hands. Two, that the best haul of genuine stones which he'd seen in years was disappearing. He cleared his throat, and waved his podgy fingers.

"Now wait a minute," he protested. "There's a big risk handling that stuff, and you know it. Four hundred. Not a penny more."

The other grinned knowingly.

"I tell you I'll give em away," he said gruffly. "Fifteen hundred, and I'll listen to you."

"You're crazy !" snapped Grayson.

"Maybe — but not as crazy as that," said the other.

"Seven-fifty. That's my final offer."

"Sure it is. Jumped up pritty quick, ain't it? I'll wait until Flick comes out. *"He'll* give me two thousand, and reckon he's got a bargain. Let's have 'em."

Grayson held on to the oilskin bag, and looked at the big man, into those piercing hazel eyes. For some reason his back went cold. He had made a big mistake in thinking the other was easy meat, but he still wanted those jewels.

"Listen," he said, "twelve hundred, level. You'll never find anyone else to give you more, son, and, remember, I take all the risks while smothering the stuff. Now, what about it ?"

The big man seemed to hesitate. Then he thrust his gloved hands into his pockets and nodded.

"Cash right away," he said, "in small notes."

"I'll have to get 'em," said Grayson.

"I'll wait," said his caller.

Three hours later Mannering strolled into the Leadenhall Street branch of the City and Western Bank and deposited four hundred pounds. The cashier nodded respectfully, secretly admiring the lean, strong face of the famous John Mannering. From there Mannering went to the National

Bank and deposited a similar amount, finishing up with adding three hundred and fifty pounds to his account at the Piccadilly branch of the South-eastern.

"I think," he soliloquised as he strolled towards the Ritz afterwards, "that I deserve the other fifty for pin-money. Grayson will be useful in future, but the less I see him the better I'll like it. Furrrh!"

The pressure of the rubber pads he had placed in his cheeks that afternoon — which explained the "impediment" — and the ridge where his cunningly adapted false front-teeth had barked against his gums still seemed present in his mouth. The teeth consisted of thin rubber, stretched over the surface, and the discomfort was worth it, he knew. Eyes or no eyes, Dicker Grayson would not have recognised him if he had tried for a month.

"Anyhow," he told himself with satisfaction, "that's one urgent problem settled."

It was just after four o'clock when he reached his flat, and he opened the door without the slightest premonition of trouble. There was, after all, no reason why he should expect it. He lit a cigarette, and then glanced round.

In that moment he knew that he had been visited.

He had no time for thinking before the faintest of movements in the bathroom caught his ears. His eyes narrowed a fraction, and his lips tightened, but he went round the room despite the knowledge that the intruder was still there.

A drawer of his writing-desk was partly open, and the position of the settee had been altered. On the carpet there was a small sheaf of bills, until recently resting in the drawer; other small things confirmed the object of the visitation. He was being burgled; and his thoughts flew immediately to Septimus Lee.

His reaction to this new and unsuspected danger was cool. In the past few months he seemed to have achieved a state of nerves as close to rock-like as was humanly possible. The problem of the moment was the only thing that concerned him; everything else was driven from his mind.

His flat had been raided, and the raider was still there; his luck was holding. The probability was that Septimus Lee — or Levy Schmidt — had connected the robbery at Streatham, and was investigating.

Mannering was sorely tempted to go immediately to the desk and explore the false bottom of one of its drawers — the drawer where the Rosa pearls were hidden. He overcame the temptation, and walked instead to the window, opening it an inch before lighting a cigarette. Then he stripped off his jacket and turned his shirt-sleeves up to the elbows, as if he was going to wash his hands. Not for a moment did he give the impression that he was on the alert.

His face was expressionless as he walked to the bathroom door. He knew that he was being watched, or waited for. A moment's reflection told him that the raider was probably behind the door, waiting for his entry. He grinned suddenly, and pushed the door back — hard!

There was an *ouch!* of pain, an oath, the sound of a heavy body hitting against the wall. The door was flung to again, but he steadied it with his foot and rushed into the bathroom, ready for trouble, but it wasn't likely to come. A thickset man was reeling against the wall, holding his nose, a nose that streamed rich red

blood.

"Now don't do that," said Mannering chidingly. "Best thing for nose-bleeding is to hold your head back. Or try a door-key."

The man swore viciously and swung a clumsy right towards Mannering's chin. Mannering slipped it without any trouble, and clipped his man beneath the jaw twice in rapid succession. The other gasped and swayed away.

"Which should teach you," said Mannering cheerfully, "that the reward for ingratitude is what you don't expect. Now, my friend, duck your head into that basin for a minute."

He grabbed the man's arm and led him to the washing-basin, ducked his head below the level of the taps, and turned the cold-water tap full on. The man gasped and struggled, but Mannering's grip was tight and painful. The water turned a muddy brown, but a second basinful was only slightly discoloured.

"Now," said Mannering, still cheerfully, and surveying the other's dripping head and shoulders contemplatively, "dry yourself. Next time I'll hit you."

There was a light in his eyes and a glad song in his heart as the other obeyed, quickly enough and without further resistance. "The luck," Mannering told himself, "is running my way so much that I'm beginning to wonder whether it *is* luck — or destiny."

"And now tell me all about it," he said aloud.

The man's lips twitched. He was an ill-favoured ruffian, old, the ex-pug type at its worst, but there was no fight left in him. His nose, where the full force of the door had caught him, was swollen, red, and angry, and there was a bruise on his chin corresponding with the break on Mannering's knuckles.

The latter took a bottle of iodine from the medicine-chest and dabbed his grazed skin. He offered the bottle to the silent and sullen intruder, but his only reward was a snarl.

Mannering's eyes hardened, although his voice was still

gentle.

"You and I," he said, "aren't going to get on very well unless you mend your ways, my friend. You've got a nice new suit — try to live up to it."

The man glanced down automatically towards his newly creased trousers. Mannering laughed, but there was a note in his voice that seemed to strike cold. It was no longer gentle.

"Now — spill it!" he snapped.

The man's eyes met his, wavered, and finally turned away; he looked at the carpet, his feet shuffling.

"I ain't saying nuthin'," he grunted.

"No?" asked Mannering softly.

"No!" snarled the bruiser; "and if I git 'arf a chance . . ." He stopped suddenly as Mannering moved, his lips twisted in a smile; the others eyes glinted with a sudden fear. "Where are you goin', mister?"

To call the police," said Mannering affably. "Perhaps you'll know whether I should get in direct touch with Scotland Yard or . . ."

"You're kiddin'!"

Mannering paused, with his hand on the telephone.

"Now, why," he demanded, "should I be kidding? Try and remember the "g", George."

The man eyed him and the telephone with a fast-increasing fear. His hands were moving nervously, and his tongue slid along his thick lips. He was on tenterhooks, and Mannering was enjoying the situation.

"I — the boss said . . ." The bruiser started to speak, and then broke off uncertainly.

"Ah!" murmured Mannering. In his ear the telephone was burring; he replaced the receiver softly. His hand moved from the telephone, and the other's eyes showed relief. "So someone sent you

? And I was thinking that you'd thought it all out in your own noodle. I'm disappointed, my friend."

The man glared, goaded almost to a point of desperation.

"Never mind the funny stuff," the bruiser snarled, momentarily forgetful of his fear.

"You honour me," said Mannering politely.

"If I ever git my 'ands rarnd . . ."

Mannering lifted the receiver off the hook again, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the man swallow hard, saw his tongue slide along his lip. The cracksman grinned as he dialled "O" and a moment later heard the voice of the Inquiries operator. She was likely to be irritated before he had finished, he realised, but she would merely put down yet another subscriber as unreasonable.

"Give me . . ." began Mannering for the other man's benefit.

"For Gawd's sake!" cried the bruiser. He seemed to realise for the first time that Mannering was serious, and his face was livid, his hands trembling.

"I beg your pardon," said Mannering to the operator, "my friend doesn't want the call alter all." He replaced the receiver, and sauntered towards the other, who was standing by the fire-place. He grinned at him for a moment. Then: "Well, George, who sent you?"

"You know right enough," grunted the bruiser.

Mannering laughed, and shook his head in well-feigned bewilderment.

"Is this a game?" he inquired. "You praise my humour, and now you tell me I can read your thoughts. I think . . ."

He broke off deliberately, for there was doubt in the other's eyes.

"Straight, mister, don't you know?"

"As man to man, no," said Mannering. "All I know is that I sometimes keep a little packet of stones here, and I guess that your amiable boss thought he would try to rid me of one of them. Luck

sent me when you were here."

"And you ain't got 'em?"

"Got what?"

"The Rosas."

"The Ros . . . By all the Jews in Jerusalem! I'll wring that little sweep's neck!" Mannering looked genuinely angry, and the pug's eyes no longer held uncertainty; he believed what Mannering wanted him to believe. "So Lee sent you," Mannering went on, "did he, because those ruddy stones were collared the other night? Where is Lee?"

"At — at Streatham."

"What part, you idiot? The cricket pitch or the common?"

"Mister!" The crook's eyes held appeal now, and his voice was thick with fear, instead of anger. "Don't tell 'im I told yer — don't tell 'im about the Rosas, don't, mister . . ."

Mannering hesitated, and it seemed to his victim that he was cooling down. Actually he was enjoying himself.

"And why," he demanded coldly, "should I do anything to save you from a nasty ten minutes with Septimus Lee ?"

The crook said nothing. Mannering eyed him for a moment in silence. Then he tossed his cigarette-case, which the other caught easily enough, despite his surprise.

"Or don't you smoke?" asked Mannering.

"Well, I don't mind, boss. . . ." The man was confused, unable to make head or tail of this sudden geniality.

"Nice of you. Now, George" — Mannering went closer to his man and looked at him steadily — "I want the truth. Do you know what that is ?"

"I — kin make a guess, mister." Obviously the bruiser was bewildered, but he was genuinely thankful for the cigarette, which he stuck between his lips. Mannering gravely offered him a lighter.

"Excellent," he said, although whether he was referring to the

cigarette or the other's promise to try to find the truth was not obvious. "Now I know why you called, but I still want to know what you've taken."

"But I ain't . . ."

"Don't forget that guess, George!"

The man swallowed hard at the wrong moment. Tobacco-smoke and oxygen mixed badly, and he choked, going red in the face and bending half-double.

"You are in the wars," murmured Mannering sympathetically.

He waited for the fit of coughing to pass, and then repeated his question. After a moment's hesitation the pug took a package from his pocket and handed it to his captor. The latter unwrapped two slim books, and whistled when he saw them. They were the last things he had expected.

"And he told you to take my bank pass-books, did he?" His voice was hard again.

"Yus."

"And you looked at them?"

"I ain't, mister, I ain't, I swear. I wouldn't understand them things if I did. I . . ."

"Ain't," said Mannering. He scowled. "You have."

"But I . . ."

"I know. You ain't. But you have, George. Just think a minute now. You looked at them, and one had four figures and the other four or five. You're not sure which. You just glanced at them when I came in. Isn't that so ?"

The pug's eyes glistened.

"I — I git you, mister."

"You'd better. Tell Mr Septimus Lee that: one book four figures, the other four or five. If you don't — and I shall have little difficulty in finding whether you do or not — if you don't, George, I shall whisper to Septimus the single word "Rosa". You still get me?"

“I swear, mister . . .”

“So you don’t go to Sunday School, George ? Well, well. Now run along, will you? I want to think.”

If he spoke the truth, however, he derived little pleasure from his thoughts. He had convinced himself that the best thing to do was to let the burglar go, but as he pondered over the affair he realised that Lee was clever indeed. The Jew had not expected to get the pearls back, but he had tried to satisfy himself about the state of Mannering’s bank-balance.

Mannering was still flushed with his victory over the Jew, but he realised that the other was dangerous, more dangerous perhaps than the police. The one thing to do, he told himself, was to visit Lee; probably nothing else would be so convincing. He would stick to his promise: he would not tell Lee that the pug had mentioned the Rosas; but there was nothing to prevent him from putting two and two together after recognising the man as Lee’s chauffeur.

CHAPTER TEN

MANNERING SEES THE FUNNY SIDE

"I OWE YOU AN APOLOGY, MR MANNERING. I OFFER IT."

"I owe you," grunted John Mannering, "a beating up, brother to the one I handed out to that darned chauffeur of yours. Yes, I saw him outside as I came in. His nose is very sore, and I think you . . ."

You are not going to ask me to believe," said Septimus Lee suavely, "that you will offer physical violence to a man so much older than yourself, Mr Mannering? I repeat, I offer you my apology. If you think deeply you will realise that it was a very natural thing for me to suspect . . ."

"Not unless you were a . . ."

Mannering broke off, and coloured. He did it well and a peculiar little smile hovered round Septimus Lee's thin lips.

"You weren't going to say "crook", Mr Mannering? Such an awkward word, and — well, your interest in the Rosa pearls would have admitted a very strange construction, wouldn't it? From the police, I mean, or even your friends."

Mannering rubbed his chin in apparent agitation.

"Ye-es," he admitted. He frowned. "All the same, I'll make sure it's the last business I ever do with you, Lee."

"To my *eternal* regret," murmured Lee.

Mannering glared at him for a moment, and then turned away, opening the door before the clerk could arrive. Septimus Lee smiled and sighed; his conviction, as Mannering went out, was that he had made a mistake about the man.

"And that," Mannering told himself, "will keep Mr Lee off the grass for a little while. But he's a crafty old devil. I'll have to be careful."

He did his best to forget the interview, and it was not long

before he was thinking of a certain recent acquaintance. He smiled a little, and decided to pay a visit immediately.

Mr (late Herr) Karl Seltzer was a middle-aged, bullet-headed, placid, and kindly German, who specialised in the teaching of languages. In many ways Seltzer was unique. To hear him talk in English, French, German, Russian, or a dozen different languages, was a revelation. He sounded like a different man. Not only was the accent perfect, but he was able to adapt his voice to the very tones of the races whose language he was speaking.

Mannering had heard of him casually, and, realising that it was essential to be able to control — and if necessary change — his voice on occasions, he had started a course of lessons. The inflection was a matter of practice, and Seltzer was happy to find so adept a pupil; what he would have thought if he had known why Mannering was so anxious to be able to control the timbre and tone of his voice, Mannering preferred not to ask himself.

The German's square face brightened as Mannering entered his office in Wardour Street, for Mannering was amiable as well as intelligent.

"A pleasure to see you, Mr Mannering," he greeted.

"And not so bad to see you," smiled Mannering. "I've just popped in for ten minutes," he added, "to learn to be a Frenchman."

"To learn the voice of a Frenchman," corrected the tutor. "It would be a very difficult matter, Mr Mannering, to make you look anything but English."

"That's something," Mannering murmured, but he grinned to himself. Seltzer would go a long way before delivering so effective a back-hander.

After twenty minutes Mannering left the office and surprised himself by asking for cigarettes in fluent French. The girl at the kiosk looked at him bemusedly and demanded, "Ai?"

"I beg your pardon," said Mannering, with a smile that made

her think of him on and off for the rest of the day. “Fifty Virginia Fives, please.”

He paid for the cigarettes, smiled again, and walked on, thinking of the effectiveness of Seltzer’s lessons. The possibility that he might spoil his ability to act quickly in an emergency by developing technique too much did not worry him a great deal. The occasion for using two or three entirely different-sounding voices did not come frequently, it was true, but it was an angle of his new profession that he found fascinating. He wondered how many years would pass before he was really confident of himself in every way.

Then he put the thought on one side and dwelt pleasantly on the next few hours. He was meeting Lorna at the Elan, and he had been looking forward to it all day. He saw her frequently — almost too frequently for his peace of mind — and there had been no meeting yet that he had not enjoyed thoroughly. He believed she could say the same.

He walked slowly towards the hotel, knowing that he was in good time. He felt at peace with the world. A warm sun was shining, but London was not too hot. The inevitable streaming crowds passed him, coming from heaven knew where. He wondered what they would think if they knew who was passing.

He reached the Elan, and forgot the subject, for Lorna followed almost on his heels.

“Am I late or are you early?” she asked, as they shook hands.

“We’re both marvels of punctuality,” said Mannering. “Shall we eat here, or do you know of a better manger?”

“Here, I’m afraid. I must be home by half-past two.”

“Duty calling — or parents,” chuckled Mannering.

As she peered at the menu he studied her thick, well-marked brows, the delicacy of her skin, the upward curve of her lips. Not for the first time he wondered why she so often was quiet almost to sullenness, why the expression in her fine eyes was so often

mutinous. She seemed to bear a grudge against life, although there were moments when she forgot it, and when he forgot everything but the fact that they were together.

A week never passed that he did not see her; usually they met three or four times. The verbal fencing of the first meeting had gone. They spoke little to each other, but both enjoyed the long silences of real companionship. The ghost of Marie Overndon was dimming.

"Still keeping busy?" he asked, as they waited.

"Plenty to do," she said. "I'm still waiting to paint you."

"I still prefer photographs," Mannering laughed.

"I think I'll have the clear soup," said Lorna obscurely.

Mannering looked about him during the meal. The Elan, at that time, was reaching the peak of its fame. Twice in as many months foreign royalties had graced it with their presence, and the crowd of moneyed hopefuls, hangers-on, and dilettanti grew larger week by week. Although it had the largest exclusive-dining-floor in London only a table here and there was unoccupied, and two Cabinet Ministers were present.

"What's attracting you ?" Lorna asked suddenly.

Mannering smiled, and motioned to a far corner.

"I was looking at the Countess," he said. "She's telling someone about a brooch . . ."

"Emma? Is she here?" Lorna Fauntley looked round, and smiled as she saw the Dowager Countess of Kenton talking animatedly with three companions at a table near the orchestra.

"With the Americans," Lorna added, a moment later.

"Newcomers ?"

"H'm-h'm. I believe they've already been asked to meet the fascinating Mr Mannering."

Mannering chuckled. His companion saw the flash of his white teeth, the fascinating — that *was* the right word! — gleam in his

eyes. A cloud passed through hers, lingering for a few moments.

Mannering affected not to notice it.

“When and where?” he asked.

“Langford Terrace,” said Lorna. “Do you know, I think the Fauntley stock has gone up several points since it put a collar round you.”

“How sweetly you express it!” said Mannering.

Lorna laughed, but there was bitterness in her eyes and in her expression. Mannering did not pretend not to notice it j this time only a fool could have failed.

“Lorna,” he said quietly. “H’m-h’m?”

“Do you think, one day soon, we could talk of marriage?”

There was silence for a moment. Her eyes filled with something which was closely akin to fear. Her voice lacked its usual steadiness as she spoke.

“Please,” she said, “please don’t, ever. I’m not the marrying kind, John. Forget it, will you?”

Mannering eyed her reflectively.

He knew that he would not have agreed if his reputed wealth had been real; lie was beginning to realise that Lorna Fauntley, so self-reliant, rebellious, competent, graceful withal, and beautiful with that dark, stormy beauty which had intrigued him when he had first met her, now obsessed him. There was mystery in her smouldering eyes, and challenge. She seemed to suffer, and Mannering, with his knowledge of the months which had followed his visit to Overndon Manor, believed that he understood the cause of that suffering.

But he nodded slowly; they spoke of other things.

It was on the following day that Mannering looked at himself in a mirror, the dressing-table mirror in his bedroom at the Elan Hotel.

“You’re a prize ass, J. M.” he said quietly. (The habit of

talking to himself had commenced soon after his first excursion into the territory of other people's property, and he indulged in it more and more as time went on.) "A gold-medallist in fools. You went *into* this because you made an ass of yourself over a woman; you can't want to get *out* of it because of another. Oh, I know she's different; I know the thing's taboo between us; I know . . . Stop it, J. M.! You can't get out. Or if you do, you're scuppered. Do you get that ? Scuppered, or as near as makes no difference. One day, if you make enough, yes . . ."

He broke off suddenly, and started as a tap came on the door of the outer room.

He looked at himself in the mirror again. His face had paled a little, and his lips were very close together. He was jumpy. The tap on the door had scared him momentarily. Odd how his nerves were a long way from steady — outside his job.

He lit a cigarette as he walked into the outer room and called, "Come in." The door opened, more slowly than usual. Mannering felt his blood racing; there were times when he dreaded unexpected visitors, and fancied Bristow, for instance, putting awkward questions. Now . . .

"Damn!" he muttered again, and then exploded: "Jimmy, you smothering son of a . . ."

"You leave my ancestry alone," said Jimmy Randall cheerfully. He was a well-built man, fleshier than Mannering, but not fat; his face was pleasantly proportioned, although few would have called him handsome. But the lazy grin on his lips and in his eyes endeared him to most people.

"Just why," inquired Mannering, with some warmth, "did you come in like that?"

Randall cocked his head and frowned.

"Hump! You're not well, J. M. That was a joke."

"A joke?"

“Don’t Wodehouse me,” retorted Randall; “and for the love of Mike give me a cigarette.”

Mannering offered his case, and extended his lighter gravely. He realised that Randall was in humorous mood, and Jimmy Randall on such occasions was impossible and thick-skinned. Randall sent a stream of smoke towards the ceiling, and then grinned, howbeit with a certain nervousness.

“I’ll?” asked Mannering sympathetically.

Randall nodded, and then shook his head. That there was something worrying him Mannering could see, and he felt uneasy. This was one of the sides of his new life that he found worrying — the constant fear that someone — friend or foe didn’t matter — had guessed or learned of his activities.

“No,” said Randall at last. “I was — I was wondering, J. M., whether you’d like to come down to Somerset for a week or two.”

“That must be why you cracked that joke just now,” said Mannering soberly. He frowned a Little. “What *is* worrying you ?” he demanded.

Randall laughed, as if relieved at the thought that the other had hall guessed.

“Well, I — it’s some time now since Toby and I tried to . . .”

“Set my feet on the strait and narrow path. Look here” — Mannering seemed genuinely apprehensive — “is this becoming a life’s habit?”

“Well,” said Randall, easing his collar, “not exactly. What I’m really trying to get out — but you’re such a funny cuss I don’t know how to put it — is that an old fla — friend of yours is due in town at the end of the week. And . . .”

“An old flame,” mused Mannering. “Muni, Madaline, Alice

Randall shook his head, and Mannering scowled, uncertain whether this was a further display of the other’s humour. The idea seeped into his mind slowly, and the smile gradually disappeared.

He hardly realised that his body had gone rigid, and that his face was set very grimly. Then he laughed — a forced laugh without a trace of humour.

"You mean — Marie Overndon ?"

"Yes," said Randall, eyeing his friend closely. Mannering was smiling easily enough; after that first moment he seemed to have complete control over himself, and Randall breathed more freely.

"Everything else apart," he said, "I thought I'd better tell you. Every time she's been in town lately you've been away, but now . . ."

"Mere chance that I've missed her," said Mannering. "But what's the *real* trouble?"

Randall shrugged his shoulders, and Mannering knew that there was something more than the fact of Marie Overndon's visit to London.

"She's getting married," Randall blurted out at last, and he coloured furiously.

Mannering widened his eyes and laughed, fully under control now.

"The devil she is! And the man?"

"One of Lady Kenton's new Americans."

"Speed !" Mannering laughed, and lit another cigarette. "Money and . . ." Randall grinned, reassured now. "Anyhow, if you'd like to go down to Somerset for a week or two, old boy, use me. I mean, the Kentons and the Fauntleys are pretty thick, and you'll never be able to side-step the wedding and what-not So . . ."

"Now, that wedding," said Mannering, cheerfully and hopefully, "should be something special, with Lady Mary on the one side, the Dowager on the other, and the almighty dollar overlooking all. It ought to be terrific, Jimmy !"

"But I thought," said Randall, "that you . . ."

"Would wilt under the blow." Mannering's smile told nothing.

“I might have; I won’t now.”

“You’re a funny animal,” said Jimmy Randall judicially. “I can’t make you out lately.”

“It’s my complex,” said Mannering comfortingly, “and your digestion. Have you seen Toby lately?”

“Yes, and then again no,” said Randall. “I went along to see him this morning, but I was beaten by a short head by some police fellow. Bloke named Bristow.”

“Bristow?” Mannering echoed the word, and the room seemed misty. “I seem to know the name . . .” He grinned, making an effort that he would not have believed himself capable of a few weeks before. Bristow and Plender together — good God! “Of course, the Kenton brooch fellow. Have *you* heard about that, Jimmy . . .”

“Has anybody in London escaped it?” groaned Randall. Mannering sat and smoked for twenty minutes alter his friend’s departure, and there was only one thought in his mind. He voiced it to himself slowly.

“Now, why is Bristow visiting Toby?” he demanded. “There can’t be any connection, of course, but . . .”

He stuck at that “but”. There was no reason for imagining Bristow’s visit to the lawyer was not a coincidence, but at that time Mannering’s immersion into the cold water of his game was comparatively new; frequently it made him shiver. He waited at the hotel for half an hour, almost expecting the telephone-bell to ring or Bristow and Plender to enter the apartment. It was sheer funk, he admitted to himself The robbery at Streatham, the jewels he had sold to Grayson, the affair of Bristow at the pawnshop, all seemed to carry the very letters of his name. He *had.* been concerned in them. It was absurd to think that Bristow and the others had been hoodwinked, madness to think that the name Baron deceived them.

“For God’s sake,” he muttered suddenly, “get on top of yourself! If you must do something telephone Toby, talk to him, get

it over . . .”

For the third time that afternoon he looked at himself in the mirror, and now he saw the film of sweat on his forehead. He smiled suddenly, and the mirror grinned back at him sardonically.

“Your biggest trouble,” he said, “is going to be keeping yourself in hand, J. M.”

He felt steadier as he acted on his decision, left the hotel, and taxied to the Chancery Lane offices of Toby Plender. Plender was in, cheerful and more Punch-like than ever.

“I suppose you couldn’t get mixed up in a scandal of some kind, could you?” he inquired, as they shook hands. “It would look good. Solicitors to Mr John Mannering — Plender, Son, and Plender. A little notoriety helps even sober lawyers.”

“I’m so hectically idle these days that I couldn’t fit it in,” Mannering said. “And, anyhow, I sacked my solicitor a long time ago.”

Plender smiled at the thrust. His eyes bored into Mannering — or so Mannering thought.

“Did you, then ?” he said, and shrugged his shoulders. “By the way . . .”

For some reason Mannering’s mouth was dry, and his face, although Plender noticed nothing, was very drawn.

“I had a visit from a would-be friend of yours this morning,” Plender finished.

Mannering stared. He tried to make the stare look intelligent, but something was hammering inside his mind, an insistent warning. It had come as a shock, even though he told himself he had half-expected it. But why was Toby so friendly ?

“A would-be what ?” he managed to ask at last.

“Friend. At least, acquaintance. Do you know Old Bill at all?”

“Old Bill? . . .”

“Bristow,” said Plender, pushing cigarettes across his desk.

“Obviously you don’t.”

“You mean the policeman ?” Mannering was surprised by the evenness of his voice. “The poor devil who’s handling the Kenton brooch job ?”

“The same,” chuckled Plender.

Mannering’s mind cleared suddenly. If Toby Plender *knew* anything he wouldn’t be talking like this, and that smile wouldn’t be in his eyes. Something had happened out of the ordinary, but it wasn’t anything which connected h m, Mannering, with the recent robberies; the relief made him feel almost light-headed, but he spoke casually enough.

“What’s he after?” he asked.

Plender chuckled again.

“An amateur detective,” he said. “He’s noticed that you and one or two others have always been present — nearly always, anyhow — when a job’s been done. Do you know what a “job” is?”

“I’ve an idea,” smiled Mannering. The truth was gradually dawning, the amazing, incredible truth.

“Well,” went on Plender, “Bristow’s got an idea that one of the servants is the culprit. He can’t follow the Fauntley crowd round the country — they *do* shift a bit. J. M. — and he wondered whether I thought you would care to keep an eye open.”

“Not me!” gasped Mannering.

Plender chuckled, and his chin nearly met his nose.

“Yes, he’s serious. He asked me — knowing that I know you well — whether I thought you’d jib at the idea. Apparently it’s entirely his own, without any official sanction, and he’s not sure whether you’ll take the suggestion nicely or whether you’re another Lady Kenton

“Eh?” asked Mannering bemusedly.

“In a manner of speaking,” said Plender. “Well — curse you, J. M.!” He broke off, and grinned, for Mannering was red in the face.

His body was quivering, and he was pressing his hands against his sides, hard. For a full three minutes he sat back in his chair, heaving; it was one of those absurd, infectious laughs that stopped for a split second and then went on again. Plender grinned, chuckled, and started to laugh with his friend. The absurdity of it made his laugh convulsive.

"Oh — my — Lord!" gasped Mannering, as the convulsions subsided. "I'm sorry — Toby — but I just — saw the funny side of it! Oh — my — Lord!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARIE OVERNDON'S WEDDING

"YOU QUITE APPRECIATE, MR MANNERING," SAID DETECTIVE-Inspector William Bristow, "that it's entirely an idea of my own. I hardly like to approach you, but the thefts are getting more frequent. The presence of regular men might act as a deterrent; I'd much rather catch the thieves red-handed, though. They won't for a moment suspect you of working with the police."

"They ?" queried John Mannering.

"He's smart," thought Bristow to himself. Aloud: "Yes, there may be more than one, I fancy, but I'll admit I'm completely in the dark." He chuckled, not entirely with humour. "The Press calls it "baffled", and that isn't far wrong."

Mannering, sitting in the small office of the detective at Scotland Yard, lit a cigarette thoughtfully and flicked the match out of the open window. His expression was serious; mentally he was going through similar convulsions to those which had seized him in Toby Plender's office two hours before. He had called at Scotland Yard, to discover that Bristow was only too pleased by the eagerness with which he proffered his help, and it was too early for him fully to appreciate the joke.

"It *is* a bit of a poser," he admitted. "To tell you the truth. Inspector, I've been tempted to try my hand at solving it before, but I didn't want to tread on any official corns."

"I can relieve you of that worry," said Bristow, feeling very cheerful. He had heard a great deal of John Mannering, and he was thinking that the rumours had not been exaggerated. Mannering was a distinguished man and an intelligent one. By saying that he had been tempted to try his own hand at solving the mystery of the thefts he had put the detective at his ease immediately. It would not be a case of doing a service for Bristow — and Bristow disliked

being under an obligation to any man — it would be a matter of equal interests; by giving Mannering semi-official authority to make inquiries Bristow had pleased Mannering as much as Mannering had pleased him.

Bristow felt very satisfied with himself.

He was as worried as he had ever been by the continual thefts, for he was no nearer a solution of the mystery than he had been weeks before, and the idea of getting Mannering's help had struck him as a brain-wave. Mannering was rich; Mannering was sound. Plender, one of the most respected and reputable solicitors, vouched for him. Bristow would no more have dreamed of suspecting Mannering of being the thief than he would have dreamed of suspecting that the Dowager Lady Kenton had stolen her own bauble.

"Yes," repeated the detective, "you can do just what you like, Mr Mannering — within reason, that is — and I can assure you that you will get all the help I can give you."

Mannering nodded thoughtfully, forcing back an absurd desire to guffaw.

"You're absolutely at a loss?" he asked.

Bristow made no bones about it.

"Absolutely," he confirmed. "I've tackled the servants, and all of them seem all right. I've been inclined to doubt whether it's always the outside job that it seems to be, but everything certainly points that way."

Mannering pursed his lips.

"Supposing we run over some of the — er — jobs?" he suggested. "I could see your angle, and perhaps work better. I might as well do it thoroughly," he added, with a smile, "if I'm going to do it at all."

Old Bill was more pleased than ever. Mannering was intelligent enough to realise that the police angle was important;

obviously he had no objection to learning, and he was certainly putting his best into the job. The detective warmed to the other man.

And Mannering warmed to the detective.

He had always heard that old Bill Bristow was popular, and he had been surprised to learn that the men who had been in prison for periods ranging from a month to seven years often had a good word for the sprucely dressed Inspector. He could understand why. Bristow did his job humanely; he treated a rogue as a man, and was always friendly.

Mannering was feeling sorry for Bristow too. It was the richest thing that the Baron could have conceived, and he enjoyed the next hour more than any he had spent for a long time. This meeting and arrangement, he knew, would give him the one thing he lacked — confidence when he was with other people connected with the robberies as Mannering and not Baron.

“First,” Bristow said, “you had best know we’re dubbing our man “the Baron”.”

Mannering frowned and asked the obvious “Why?”

He learned of the pawn-ticket and the things Bristow had discovered about the Baron’s activities; and he learned that Superintendent Lynch had first stopped talking of Baron, and added the “the”; for this Mannering was particularly grateful.

For an hour he went over with the policeman the various thefts that had taken place in houses visited by the Fauntley circle. He discovered just how much Bristow had done to find the thief. He learned the usual formalities, the regular system; and he could see where the routine work had been bound to fail to surmount the difficulties of the problem.

It was an illuminating conference. Mannering felt, as they finished and leaned back in their chairs, that he would be able to outwit Bristow in a dozen different ways. It was as perfect a joke as

he had ever met, and the only thing which spoiled it was the fact that he was forced to keep it to himself.

Old Bill accepted a cigarette as he stopped talking.

"So you see," he said, as two streams of smoke went towards the ceiling, "that you've a pretty stiff job on, Mr Mannering. Whenever possible you want to be near the lighting-switch."

"I can manage," said Mannering, with a smile.

"And yet be unobserved," said Bristow.

"I could try," murmured Mannering.

An unassuming fellow, thought Bristow.

"Is there any — er — place where you think there might be trouble in the near future?" Mannering put the question idly.

Bristow scowled at that.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Of course, there's the Overndon wedding . . ."

"H'm," murmured Mannering.

"I will say one thing about the Americans," said Bristow, "and that's that they're thorough. Er — you know about the affair?"

Mannering nodded. He had discovered, since Jimmy Randall's visit that afternoon, that Marie Overndon was marrying Frank Wagnall, of the Brooklyn Wagnalls. Wagnall, with his parents and with several friends, was in London for the season — and a little longer than the season — and the high spot o; their visit now was the marriage. Mannering did not know the Wagnalls, but he had heard that they were reputed to be very rich.

What bitterness he had felt towards Marie had completely gone, although the effect of that month at Overndon Manor remained in part, of course. It had completely changed him, and it had started him in this mad game of chance. In many ways he was glad. There was something exhilarating in it, a zest he had never before experienced. The very fact of sitting in Bristow's office discussing crimes which he himself had committed was more

stimulating than any spirit.

But he did feel that Marie Overndon's wedding would give him an excellent opportunity for a haul larger than anything he had made, excepting for the Rosa pearls; and there would be more than a little malicious pleasure in it.

He stopped reflecting as Bristow went on.

"Very thorough, like most Americans. This man Wagnall — the father, not the son — has asked us for a guard, and he's using Dorman's Agency too. The presents will be nearly as safe as the Grown Jewels."

"Nearly?" questioned Mannering, easing himself in his chair,

Bristow scowled, and rubbed his chin.

"I'm not happy about the Baron," he said. "He's slick. We've got to admit that."

Mannering nodded, and had difficulty in repressing the "thank you" that came to his lips.

"There's one thing," said Bristow more cheerfully, "which suggests that he won't try anything at the wedding. He's never tried anything big."

"Yet," said Mannering, and thought suddenly of Lorna Fauntley.

Bristow's scowl returned.

"That's what I'm worried about," he admitted. "I'm afraid he will, one day."

Mannering decided that it was wise to hedge away from that angle of the affair, and he lost no time.

"What makes you think there might be trouble at the Overndon show?" he demanded. "It's not the only wedding; the Chunnley affair and the Forsters. . . ."

"It's the publicity," said Bristow. "You'll find the Overndon wedding at the top of every social column. The others are also-rans. And some of the gifts . . ."

"Asking for trouble, are they?" murmured Mannering sympathetically.

"Yes," said Bristow, "but, as I say, I've got to admit that they're taking every possible precaution. Er-you'll be there, of course ?"

"It can be arranged," said Mannering.

"I'd be awfully glad if you will," said Bristow.

Mannering nodded, and stood up. They shook hands, before a uniformed man showed Mannering out of the office, led him along the passages of the Yard, and guided him eventually into Parliament Street. The sergeant treated him with considerable respect, for friends of Detective-Inspector William Bristow were men of importance at Scotland Yard.

Mannering gathered that impression, and told himself that he mattered in more ways than one. He wondered, not for the first time, what Bristow would look like if ever he discovered the truth.

At that moment Mannering wasn't worried about the possibility of discovery. He felt safer than the Bank of England as he called a taxi and made his way to the Elan to celebrate the occasion, he told himself cheerfully. He was on top of the world that day.

It was not difficult to ensure an invitation from the Overndons for the wedding, as he had guessed.

Mannering had discovered that Lady Mary and Marie were staying at Colonel George Belton's town house in Park Square. When in London Belton's visits to his club were made with clockwork regularity, and on the morning following the talk with Bristow Mannering walked to the Square, expecting to see the Colonel. He met his man — the first time they had seen each other since the affair at Overndon Manor — and for the moment the Colonel stood still, staring, and obviously at a loss. Mannering's

smile put him at his ease.

They shook hands warmly.

“Very pleasant to see you again,” said the Colonel, whose moustache was whiter than ever and whose complexion was, if anything, a trifle more rosy. “Lady Mary’d be glad to see you, John. Why not. . .”

It was typical of the soldier, thought Mannering with a smile, to do his best to put his foot in it. But as the younger man wanted the foot just where it was he nodded.

“How’s everybody?” he asked, as they turned towards the house.

“Excellent, excellent,” said the Colonel. “Marie — harr — umph — is out of town for a couple of days. Er” — the older man swallowed hard — “you know, of course, about . . .”

“Marie,” said Mannering with a laugh. “Yes — that’s why I’m so interested.”

They chatted for some minutes in the house before Lady Mary came in. She looked as sharp as ever, and for her bluntness Mannering had nothing but admiration.

“I was afraid,” she said after the mutual greeting, “you were going to be cinema-esque about that affair, and go off after big game or the chorus. It’s satisfying to find you so individual, John.”

Mannering laughed easily. Lady Mary, he noticed, still wore the frocks thai good Queen Victoria had thought *chic,* still looked severe, arrogant, and bad-tempered; her voice was still rather low, her words uttered slowly, and all the time there was a twinkle in her fine grey eyes.

“All habits get old-fashioned,” he said cheerfully. “Let’s forget it, shall we?”

The others agreed, and Mannering spent a pleasant hour.

He was preparing to go when another caller arrived, and he met the man who — although he could not guess it then — was

going to loom very large in his future adventures.

"Hallo, Gerry!" greeted the Colonel. "Ha, Mannering, you haven't met — no? Well — Gerry Long from America, Boston. Gerry — John Mannering. . . ."

Long was tall, lean-hipped, wide-shouldered, and pleasant-faced. Like many Americans, he looked nearer twenty-one than twenty-seven, an impression fostered by his corn-coloured hair and his very light skin. He had a free-and-easy attitude, and an easier laugh; Mannering liked him instantly.

"I've been told," said Long cheerfully, "that no man knows England — London especially — as well as you, Mannering."

"You've been told wrong," smiled the other.

Colonel Belton haw-hawed.

"Don't you believe it, Gerry, don't believe it. The young limb's been painting London red for — for . . ."

"Centuries," suggested Lady Mary sweetly.

"Nonsense!" snapped the Colonel, who was still easily baited by Lady Mary. He saw the gleam in her eyes and grinned. "You never leave me alone, Mary, you . . ."

"This is quite like old tlmes," said Mannering, with real warmth.

"You've a reputation," persisted Belton, as though establishing the fact beyond all shadow of doubt, "and you can't deny it, Mannering. Let me see — aren't you dabbling in stones these days ?"

Gerry Long looked interested, Mannering thought, as he nodded.

"A little; but not a great deal, mind you."

He received more than he had bargained for during the next hour. (Jerry Long was interested as a collector in stones, and he played his hobby with all the fervour of youth. It was a difficult but interesting hour, and Mannering's comparatively small knowledge

of gems was tested to the utmost. Happily for Mannering the American did most of the talking, and seemed in no way suspicious that the other was an amateur. Mannering learned a great deal that he had not known before, and he told himself that it would be useful in the future.

One of his most serious difficulties had been the telling of genuine jewels from imitation. It was a task that frequently puzzled even the experts, but by cultivating Gerry Long, who had the American thoroughness with detail, he could learn while seeming to pass opinions.

His quickly-begun friendship with Gerry Long had other advantages that were not immediately obvious.

Long was reputedly wealthier than the Wagnalls, and, indeed, he had control of an immense fortune left by a trust-manipulating father. If anything had been needed to convince the interested hangers-on of Society that John Mannering was one of the moneyed few, it was supplied by his association with the young American.

Mannering was more convinced than ever of his lucky star. He liked Long was drawn by the American's quick enthusiasm, by his determination — which was almost grim — to make the best of a six months" sojourn in England. And he decided, very quickly, that Long was one of the few people he would not rob.

"It's almost as if I still had a conscience," Mannering told himself in front of the mirror at the Elan some weeks later. "Well, to-morrow we shall see. . . ."

The morrow was the day of days for Marie Overndon and Frank Wagnall, of America. Gerry Long was to be best-man. Lorna Fauntley, rather surprisingly, was to be one of seven bridesmaids, chiefly through the influence of the Dowager Countess of Kenton.

Bristow's mention of publicity was more than justified, and the Overndon wedding was without doubt one of the outstanding events of the year. John Mannering was to be one of many

honoured guests. He used the word “honoured” when talking to himself, and there was a rather grim smile at the corners of his mouth.

Marie Overndon looked very lovely.

She was dressed in white, and as Mannering saw her walking from the altar he remembered vividly the preciousness of that month at the Manor. He remembered too the half-promises and his belief in her. But he viewed it all with the air of a cynic. He knew that beneath her serene beauty there was a brittle hardness; he reminded himself that if he had been rich, instead of — comparatively — poor, he himself and not Frank Wagnall would have been walking with her to the strain: that breathed o’er Eden.

Marie was entirely self-possessed. She saw him, he knew, but looked past him. Was there the slightest suggestion of a smile on her lips, or was his imagination playing him tricks?

Mannering looked at the man.

Wagnall had many points in common with Gerry Long. He was tall, fair-haired, lithe, and passably good-looking; he carried his clothes easily, and he looked as pleased with life as most people thought he should be. He also looked young.

Mannering, smiling slightly, watched them disappear from the church, and then told himself that he would be busy in the very near future. The last echoing notes from the great organ seemed to keep his thoughts company.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TWO SETS OF PEARLS

COLONEL GEORGE BELTON HAD OFFERED HIS HOUSE TO THE Overndons for the wedding, and he had helped the Wagnalls to make a good job of it. The old place looked positively lively where, a few months before, it had been comparatively deserted. The servants, many imported for the occasion, were resplendent in livery, and they knew how to smile. To Mannering there seemed as many menservants as there were guests, and he knew that there were over a thousand guests.

It was what the Wagnall. called a “little” crowd, and what Marie Overndon termed “just a few of my closer friends”. It was a success. Everyone seemed happy, no one was too hilarious, and the calmness of the bride, exquisite as only youth and Molyneux could make her, and very lovely in her own right, created admiration that few dared try to put into words. There were the usual speeches, the usual toasts, the usual jokes, and a refreshing contribution from Gerry Long, who, when called upon for his best-man’s oration, coloured furiously, cleared his throat, raised his glass, and said, “Here’s how!” Mannering warmed to Long; the man was completely unaffected.

The library had been given up to the gifts, and Mannering was more interested in it than in anything else.

He looked round it, soon after the bride and groom had left for Paris and thence to the South. The room was admirably situated, he knew. For one thing, there were no windows, but two glass skylights set slantwise in the ceiling afforded ample light.

There was only one door, which led into the hall, and that was guarded day and night by a regular plain-clothes man who had been pointed out to Mannering by Bristow, and a stocky little man, far too polite to be a guest, who was actually from Dorman’s

Detective Agency.

There were other policemen in the house too, and a guard outside. The chances of a burglary were literally nil, but the possibility of an inside job was there, however, and no chances were being taken by the Wagnalls. But. . .

Mannering had his plan worked out.

He had examined the gifts thoroughly, and found that very few of them were practicable objects for a robbery. There were three things, however, which the Baron wanted, although he was going to be satisfied if he contrived to get one of them.

The Wagnall diamonds, a necklace of rare beauty, were a present from the groom's lather to the bride. In the open market they would have been worth thirty thousand pounds. In the Baron's market they were worth about five or six thousand, and they were a prize worth gaining, although they would be difficult to sell.

The Wagnall necklace was placed in the centre of the long table and surrounded by other gifts, as though accepting their homage. At the far ends two other gifts of precious stones held places of honour. The Rennel sapphires — bought by Frank Wagnall for his wife from under the very purse of Lord Fauntley, who had been deliberating on their purchase for months — were nearest the door, and therefore the most likely prize. At the other end was the pearl-necklace that Lady Kenton had presented. Lady Kenton had taken the Wagnalls under her wing from their first day in London, and she had been constrained to make an imposing show.

She had succeeded, for the pearls had been as much admired as any of the gifts, and she almost haunted the library to hear the world commend her.

When Mannering drifted in after the reception, he found Lady Kenton with Gerry Long and two or three other acquaintances. The Dowager was exclaiming in delight at this gift and that gift, but all she said led up to her pearls, and she longed for comment. Gerry

Long saw it, and obliged. Lady Kenton's gratification was such that she voted the Americans the most courteous race on earth. Mannering looked at the pearls for three full minutes, and then said, in a voice of awe: "That is the most perfect graduation I've seen."

Lady Kenton immediately relieved America of the crown of courtesy and gave it to England. Mannering and Long smiled at each other.

And then Lady Kenton took a step forward, intent on examining a pair of gold-backed brushes presented by a distinguished gentleman from America. She stubbed her foot against a table-leg, or a chair, or the carpet — she was never sure which — she was too startled — and after a single gasp she began to hop on one foot, pressing her lips together to prevent herself from crying out in pain. Mannering and Long leapt to her rescue.

Neither of them could explain afterwards how it happened, but Lady Kenton's leg was swept from under her, and she went sprawling across the table. The cry she uttered brought the two detectives from outside flying into the room. Two men actually on the spot jumped up in alarm. Lady Kenton was still clawing at the table; Mannering and Long were doing their best to help and to restore her outraged dignity.

Twenty or thirty of the precious girts to the now happily married couple were spread about the floor, and the table, so orderly a few minutes before, was in contusion. The plain-clothes men were completely bewildered. The little private detective from Dorman's Agency was hopping from one foot to the other in an effort to count everything at once; but he failed, and Mannering was smiling contentedly to himself.

Lady Kenton had stumbled across the table some six inches away from the pearls she had presented to Mane. It was the moment for which Mannering had been waiting. He had slipped

them from the table and into his pocket while he had appeared to be concerning himself only with rescuing her. Not for a moment had the expression on his face altered. No one had seen him; no one would have guessed that in those few seconds the haul had been made. The ease of it almost made him laugh aloud.

The Dowager's body had hidden the little manoeuvre from everyone else in the room, and as at last he managed to steady her he felt like hugging her in sheer jubilation. Instead: "I'm terribly sorry," he said "I wouldn't. . ."

"It was as much my fault as yours, protested Long.

Lady Kenton was firmly convinced that it had been neither of them. She was breathing rather heavily, and surveying the mess about her. The gold-backed hair-brushes were at her feet, next to a set of carvers and a cut-glass bowl, which, happily, was not damaged.

"I slipped," she said, regaining her self-control and breathing more freely. "I really can't have you taking the blame. . . ."

Lorna Fauntley, one of many attracted by the Dowager's cry of alarm, entered the room. A look from Mannering told her that he was anxious to get the Countess out of the way. Lorna managed it, without any fuss. The excitement waned when it was discovered that there had been a slight accident, and no burglary, so far as was known.

It was Mannering who made the suggestion to Bristow's man.

"You'd better check the presents, and make sure everything's here," he suggested, and the man grimaced, but nodded in agreement.

"I don't suppose anything will be missing, sir, but if anything *does* happen it'd be safest. There have been several people in and out."

"That's just it," said Mannering. He offered the other a cigarette, and smiled to himself as his hand inside his pocket

brushed against the pearls. “Do you need any help?”

The Yard man was beginning to wonder whether the other was not a colleague. Then he remembered Mannering’s reputation, and decided against it.

“No, thanks,” he said, refusing both the help and the cigarette; “we’ll manage all right. Be best to shut the room for half an hour, though. Would you mind . . .”

“I’ll see Colonel Belton,” promised Mannering.

The Colonel, a little worried at first, was so pleased at Mannering’s assurance that it was just a precautionary measure that he insisted on locking the door of the library himself. Mannering strolled with him towards the reception-room. The gaiety of the earlier afternoon was dimming a little, although the younger spirits were still laughing and talking together. Lady Mary Overndon was yawning. The Wagnalls were thinking of getting away.

Frank Wagnall Senior, a tall, white-haired man who had made a fortune from motor cars, contrasted remarkably with his wife. He was thin, pale-faced, and tired-looking, while Daisy Wagnall was inclined to be fat, genial, rosy-faced, and possessed of surprising reserves of energy. Mannering found himself surprised that she had a son of Frank’s age.

But Mannering had little time to be astonished, for he was anxious for the party to break up quickly. He judged that the checking of the gifts would take three-quarters of an hour, and already ten minutes had passed. Before the discovery of the missing pearls was made he wanted at least a dozen of the guests to be away from the house. If that happened the police could not make a proper check, and he was anxious that they should not have the chance.

He was with Lady Mary when he stifled a yawn and then smiled apologetically.

“For a young man,” she said laughingly, “you can’t stand the

pace very well, John."

"It's my usual good habits," said Mannering, with a lazy smile. "You seem to be standing up to it well enough."

Lady Mary's smile was turned suddenly into a yawn, and they both laughed.

"To tell you the truth," said Lady Mary, laughing again, "I'm missing my afternoon nap. I'm so tired I could fall asleep any minute."

"I've strong arms," said Mannering.

"Don't be a fool," said Lady Mary. "But let's get back. If I stay here for another five minutes I swear I'll faint."

"I doubt if you've ever fainted in your life," said Mannering.

They moved towards the Wagnalls and Colonel Belton, who was making an old Guard's effort not to look as bored as he felt. Daisy Wagnall laughed.

"He's brave, but I'm not, Frankie. Say — might we hint at going?"

"Do; I'll be sweet and take it," said Lady Mary. "I'm sure hall" of us are absolutely tired out."

"Weddings — or the after-effects — are such a strain," said Daisy Wagnall.

"Darned lot of unnecessary fuss and bother," opined Colonel Belton, who had taken more pleasure than anyone in the preparations for the event.

"Don't say," said Mrs Wagnall, with refreshing directness, "that you believe in free love. Colonel? I've always told Frankie that. . ."

The Colonel suddenly realised the construction she had put on his remark, and his face was redder than Mannering had ever seen it. Lady Mary laughed gently, and took the other woman by the arm. The little party broke up, and several others followed it. Within half an hour of the excitement in the library the necessary

dozen were away from Park Square.

Mannering was standing in the hall with Lorna when Colonel Belton came up. The Colonel's face was purple now, and it was obvious that something was the matter.

But Mannering affected to notice nothing, and his smile was as cheerful as ever; he had schooled himself for the announcement that was coming.

"We're just off," he said, "but we'd like . . ."

He stopped, no longer able to ignore Belton's obvious distress, and there was concern in Lorna's eyes. Mannering spoke for her as well as himself.

"What's the trouble, Colonel ?"

"I've had the shook of my life," said Belton, breathing hard. "Er — could you spare me a minute? I won't keep him long. Miss Fauntley."

Lorna nodded, and Mannering went a few yards away with the Colonel. He was still schooling himself to make the necessary reaction and to show surprise, and the delay was unnerving. But no amount of schooling could have prepared him for the words that came.

"It's about young Long," said Belton.

Mannering's eyes narrowed, but it was the only evidence of surprise he showed; so far, of course, there was no reason for it. He waited, on the alert.

"Ye-es," said Belton. who seemed to have a great deal of difficulty in controlling his voice. "Gerry Long has — er . . . Hang it, Mannering, the pearls that Lady Kenton gave to Marie . . . They've gone. Long's been arrested."

'Gerry *Long*?" The thing came with a suddenness that made Mannering gasp, but at least he had reason enough for the stupefaction in his eyes as he stared at Belton, hardly able to believe his ears. "Arrested — but that's damned silly. On what

grounds, Colonel ?"

George Beaton looked very grim indeed.

"The only grounds I'd believe in," he said. "He had the pearls in his pocket, Mannering, in his pocket!"

Mannering stared blankly at the soldier; the thing was impossible, he told himself. *He* had the pearls. Gerry Long could not possibly have them. Yet — the police would not have acted, Belton would not have been so sure, unless it was true — which was absurd.

"I really can't believe it," he said slowly. Then he stopped and offered cigarettes, and the Colonel accepted one thankfully.

"I'll get Miss Fauntley to go along with her people," Mannering said a moment later, and at any other time Colonel Belton would have noticed the strange hardness in his companion's voice. "I won't keep you a moment. Colonel."

He reached the girl quickly and explained that he was wanted. Lorna nodded when he suggested that she should go with the others.

"Something serious?" she asked, as she saw his grimace.

For a moment Mannering thought that she had asked the question anxiously. He brushed the idea on one side; her dark eyes were laughing at him now.

"It might be worse," lie said, with an effort.

He saw Lorna into the car, and then turned back towards the Colonel, who was talking to the older Wagnall. The stocky little private detective came towards them as Mannering drew up.

"They would like to see you, Colonel Belton," he said importantly.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," said Belton testily. You, Wagnall? Mannering?"

"There's some absurd mistake," said Mannering, in an effort to restore something of the good spirits that seemed to have left the

Colonel completely. The effort fell flat, as he had half-expected; in some ways he was not sorry, for he was still utterly bewildered. The pearls which had been on the table were in his pocket; he could feel them now.

"Absolutely caught red-handed," muttered the Colonel.

"But Gerry Long!" grunted Frank Wagnall. "I just can't believe it, Colonel. Why, I've known the boy ail his life. It's some silly practical joke; it must be."

No one responded; no one felt like speaking.

The four men reached the library, and the private detective tapped on the door, which was opened by the Yard man to whom Mannering had been speaking earlier in the evening. He looked pleased with himself, and greeted Mannering cheerfully, but in an undertone.

"Rather a funny thing, eh, sir? Lucky you suggested checking up on the goods."

Mannering grunted non-committally, and stared at Gerry Long. There was something about Long's boyish face at the moment that made Mannering desperately sorry for him. Gerry looked as if he had had the biggest shock of his life. There was a smile on his face, but it was a set, almost stupid smile.

On a small table in front of him were the pearls.

For the fifth time in as many minutes Mannering felt the string in his own pocket. They were there all right, yet, if so, there were two lots of the same pearls, which was absurd. He checked the laugh that sprang to his lips, and scowled. This whole affair was bordering on the ridiculous, but it was also perilously close to a nightmare. Mannering hated the desperation in Long's eyes.

Wagnall broke the silence that threatened to develop.

"This is a silly business, Gerry," he said, and Mannering was glad that he sounded friendly enough. "What's happened ? You must have some kind of explanation. Let's have it, and clear the

thing up."

Long wearily pushed his hand through his light hair.

"I haven't," he said rather helplessly. "Only that I didn't touch the pearls on the table."

He broke off with a shrug of resignation, and for the life of him Mannering could not guess why. If ever a man looked guilty the young American did at that moment; yet . . .

"Then what the devil's the meaning of these ?" began Wagnall, and then relapsed into silence. All the men present looked at one another awkwardly, and it was Mannering who moved first. He picked up the necklace and held it close to his eyes for a moment; then he rolled the stones in his fingers thoughtfully. He had guessed what they were, even though he still could not understand how Long had come by them. Bui at least, he told himself, he could ease the tension.

"They're fakes," he said quietly.

In the silence that followed a pin dropping would have made a clatter. Only Mannering was fully under control, and his lips were twitching. The next man to recover himself was the Yard detective.

"Fakes ?" His voice cracked. "Duds! But, hang it, Mr Mannering, the real stones are missing!"

"Possibly they had dummies made for the show," said Mannering easily.

Wagnall and the Colonel shook their heads decisively.

"Never! It might have caused a scandal," Wagnall assured him.

"All the same, these are dummies — culture-pearls at their best," said Mannering, throwing the pearls into the air and catching them. "I'll wager my opinion against anyone you care to bring, Mr Wagnall."

He looked inquisitively at the American, who seemed

completely bewildered.

“But — but why the dummies?” Wagnall was staring at Gerry Long, who was still looking uncertain, and creating an impression that he knew something, that there was at least some truth in this accusation. “Tarnation, Gerry, say something! You didn’t come by these things by accident Where’d you get them?”

Wagnall’s voice had hardened, and his aggressive tone seemed to be the stimulant that Long wanted. The younger man’s eyes flashed, and he squared his shoulders, as though preparing for a physical effort.

“I don’t know where I got them,” he said slowly. “They were in my pocket; they must have been put there. . .”

The man from Dorman’s Agency laughed across the words.

“A fine story! With all respect to you, Mr Wagnall, it’s as plain as the nose on my face. Mr Long took the original pearls, hoping to slip the dummies in their place later.”

“When I’m needing your opinion,” said Wagnall coldly, “I’ll advise you.”

The man from Dorman’s dropped back a pace. Every expression went from his face, saving a mask-like smile.

“Very good, Mr Wagnall.”

“And that,” thought Mannering, “is a fair specimen of the private detective.” He tried to remember the name of the Yard man, who was still inspecting the pearls, looking as though he was thoroughly pleased with himself — a remarkable thing, now that the situation was fogged instead of clear.

Tring — Sergeant Tring, Mannering remembered, and he was glad to have even so small a thing to hold on to in this nightmare development.

Sergeant Jacob Tring, or Tanker, was thoroughly enjoying himself. The pearls were undoubtedly missing, the obvious suspect was Long, a friend of Wagnall’s, and the whole affair presented complications that would have made the average policeman savage;

Tanker was accordingly happy.

"I'm thinking," he said, after noting with malicious pleasure that the Dorman Agency man had been rapped over the knuckles, "that Mr Mannering's correct, Mr Wagnall. These are dummies all right."

The American's eyes glittered.

"Surely," he snapped, "you've reached a most important decision, officer? Perhaps you'll tell me now what you propose to do to find the real pearls ?"

Tanker was used to outbursts of all kinds, and he took them with a kind of gloomy joy.

"Yes," he said, and he said it with relish, "I propose to send for help, and make a thorough search, sir. I've telephoned for the Inspector."

"Bristow?" snapped Wagnall.

"Yes, sir," said Tanker.

Colonel Belton, who had been standing by and showing remarkable restraint, took a step forward, as though the limit had been passed.

"But it's impossible, impossible! We can't search — these — these people."

"The law's the law, sir," said Tanker, still with relish.

Belton cleared his throat and glowered. Mannering knew that he was thinking of the celebrities still in the house, of the commotion and sensation a general search would cause. He felt sorry for the Colonel at that moment, because Belton was a man who believed in the thing being the thing, and whose sense of obligation to his guests was very strong. By no stretch of the imagination could this be blamed on to him, but he took it as a personal responsibility, ignoring the fact that the police barely troubled to consult him.

"It's unthinkable," he muttered; "it's — it's not done J"

Apparently Wagnall did not agree.

"Why?" he said laconically. "What other choice have we?"

There was a pause; conflicting emotions in the room were very strong. The only man of whom Mannering was not sure was Gerry Long. Gerry was leaning against the table, smiling a little, and now thoroughly at ease. Where a few minutes before he had looked guilty and afraid of consequences, he now created the impression that he hadn't a care in the world. Belton was very red in the face, worried and annoyed. Wagnall was making the best of a bad job, and taking the thing well. Sergeant Tanker Tring and the other police-constable seemed to be looking forward to their task with considerable pleasure, while Mason, the agency man, was also pleased — maliciously.

Mannering was disappointed in Sergeant Tring.

The obvious thing, if a general search was needed, was to make sure that no one in the house was allowed to leave.

The fact that the damage was done in this direction should have made the policeman realise at once the futility of his suggestion.

He had underestimated Tring.

The Yard man believed, reasonably enough, that Long had arranged to slip the false pearls into the place of the originals and to hide or pass on to an associate the genuine string. It was the obvious solution to the mystery, and if the associate was in the house a search would reveal him — or her. On the other hand, Tring knew "that the guests had already started to leave. He doubted whether Long, who had not been in the reception-room, knew that, and, by proposing a general search, hoped to trap the young American into an admission of sorts.

Long refused the bait, but he broke the silence.

"I'm sorry that you don't feel you can take my word for it," he said. "But I'm telling you that the first time I saw those pearls" —

he pointed to the string in Tring's hand — "was when they were taken from my pocket. The *only* time."

"Nons . . ." started Bel ton, and thought better of it.

"Is that true, Gerry ?" asked Wagnall evenly.

Gerry Long flushed a little, but his voice was steady.

"I'm saying it is," he said.

Wagnall took a deep breath. Mannering, watching him, could easily understand why the man had risen to considerable heights in the commercial world. He had a way with him that created the impression that his word was the obvious law, and no one could have taken the theft more coolly.

"That's good enough for me," he said.

"But not for me, I'm afraid," said Tring respectfully.

Wagnall looked at the sergeant as though he was nonexistent.

"I'll talk with the Inspector," he said.

Tring coloured, and muttered under his breath. Mannering, now that he felt that there was little or no likelihood of trouble arising for Gerry Long, felt easier in his mind, and more able to appreciate the humours of the situation.

"Meanwhile — the search?" he suggested.

Tring's respect for him suffered a reverse, but the sergeant was used to the reactions of the untrained mind, and certainly he did not appreciate the depth of Mannering's remarks.

"Now we think of it," said the sergeant quietly, "it won't be much good, gentlemen. Half the guests are away by now."

Mannering whistled, and his surprise seemed perfectly real.

"The devil ! So they are!"

Colonel George Belton looked his relief, but had wits enough left not to speak of it. Frank Wagnall shrugged his shoulders, and Gerry Long seemed to realise that the storm had blown over for him. He was smiling in real amusement now.

It was in this atmosphere that Detective-Inspector William

Bristow found himself when he arrived in response to Tring's telephone-call. The detective heard the story, briefly outlined by Tring. The accident to Lady Kenton — how he hated the sound of that woman's name! — the check-up on the gifts, suggested by Mannering, the discovery that the pearls were missing, the finding of the lakes on Gerry Long a few minutes later. Tring was very brisk and official throughout his recital.

"What made you think Long had them?" Bristow demanded pertinently.

Tanker shrugged his shoulders.

"He happened to be just outside, sir, when I opened the door. "Trouble?" he asked. "Pearls gone," ses I, and he moved his hand towards his pocket, sir. I just slipped mine in after he'd stopped thinking about it and found 'em."

It was a little unorthodox, Bristow thought, but the end had justified the means, and he took the situation in hand immediately. He left Tring and the other Yard man to watch the library, asked Mason to guard the door against the unlikely eventuality of a further raid, and suggested to the Colonel that they should have a quiet talk.

Ten minutes after the detective had arrived all five men were sitting in the Colonel's study, one of the few rooms in the house which had not been delivered up to the celebrations.

The Colonel, much more cheerful now that the possibility of a scandal had disappeared, rang for whisky. Mannering watched the reactions of Gerry Long very carefully, and he was more puzzled than ever.

He told himself that Long had been eager for that stimulant. The American *knew* something. What was it ?

They didn't find out that evening. Bristow asked a dozen catch-questions, but Long stuck to his story. The dummy necklace, he maintained, must have been slipped into his pocket. It was

possible, of course, that it had been inserted after Lady Kenton's fall, but it might have been before that. From his knowledge of precious stones he was inclined to believe that the pearls he had commented upon to Lady Kenton had been genuine, but the light had been poor, and he had not touched them; he couldn't be certain.

"You're sure you didn't touch them?" asked Bristow.

"Ask Mannering," said Long, with a quick smile.

Mannering smiled and nodded.

"That's beyond doubt," he said. "Neither of them touched the pearls — nor did I, for that matter. We were too anxious to rescue Lady Kenton."

Bristow managed a smile, but his expression was sour.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "we've no real proof that the pearls were stolen during that little episode. They might have disappeared any time during the day. It looks," he added thoughtfully, "as if someone exchanged the real pearls for dummies, and afterwards slipped the dummies into Mr. Long's pocket."

"Thanks," drawled Gerry.

"But why remove the dummies at all ?" demanded Mannering.

Bristow shrugged his shoulders.

"I just can't say," he said. "I will do everything I can, Mr Wagnall, to recover the pearls, but I can promise nothing. It's been cleverly done — very cleverly."

Mannering smiled a little, but his satisfaction at the success of the haul was marred by the discovery of the dummies. Someone else had had their eyes on the pearls, and he would have liked to know who it was; but there was one thing that helped him: the trail was so hopelessly confused that no one was likely to get near the genuine string; certainly he had nothing of which to complain.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A SUSPECT

MANNERING WAS NOT SURPRISED ON THE FOLLOWING MORNING to find Gerry Long waiting for him in the lounge of the Elan. The American looked cheerful enough, but inwardly, Mannering thought, he was very worried. It was not long before he broached the affair of the previous afternoon, and Mannering knew that the other had been thinking about it a great deal.

"It's all right, so far as it goes," Long said, as the two men walked towards the Junior Carlton, "but I'm damned sure that Belton's suspicious of me, Mannering. And I don't quite know what to make of that detective. It's not good enough."

"You mean," said Mannering thoughtfully, "that if you could find who really took the necklace you'd be able to clear yourself ?"

"That's about the size of it," admitted Long.

"How are you going to set about it?" asked Mannering.

The American shrugged his shoulders.

"How can I ?" he demanded. "If your police can't . . ."

"You could employ a private detective," suggested Mannering.

Long laughed, without much humour.

"Another specimen like that stuffed dummy Mason?"

"Well," said Mannering with a short laugh, "the only other thing you can do is to hope that the Yard finds the thing. It isn't as if you had any idea who took them."

Long looked very grim; Mannering watched him and wondered at the set expression on his face, but he was not prepared for the bombshell that followed.

"But I have," Long said.

Just for a moment Mannering's face turned colour. They were walking along the Mall, and Mannering had been enjoying the walk and the conversation. He was sorry for Gerry Long, and he proposed

making sure as soon as it was possible that the American suffered no consequences from the suspicion that had fallen on him. Apart from that little matter he had felt thoroughly happy and at peace with the world. Success was coming easily, and he was still unsuspected — or at least so He had thought.

But Long had an idea who'd taken the pearls!

To cover his momentary confusion Mannering coughed. He straightened up with a smile that cost him a great effort.

"Sorry," he said. "Er — so you have an idea, have you? Well . . ."

"I've no objection to telling you," said Long, and Mannering's heart stopped thumping. "It seems absurd, but . . ."

"Who are you getting at?" demanded Mannering, intrigued, yet sure that Long's suspicion was not very close to the mark.

The other's words made him gasp. They came quickly, as though the American was afraid of ridicule, but there was no doubting their sincerity.

"Lady Kenton," said Gerry Long.

Lady Kenton! For a moment Mannering felt beyond the power of speech. He stared at the American, and only the grimness of the other's eyes and the obvious sincerity of the words stopped him from laughing.

"But why ?" he demanded helplessly.

"It's pretty clear," said Long, rather more nasal than he was usually, "that the old dame's fall and the disappearance of the pearls coincided . . ."

"Not necessarily," said Mannering quickly.

"But they sure did," persisted Long. "Look — I know I didn't take them. You know you didn't. Who else? She was the only one in the room, apart from the policeman . . ."

"What about Mason, the agency man ?" asked Mannering quickly.

“I’ve thought of him,” said Long. “He wasn’t near the table. In fact, I think he was actually outside the door just then.”

Mannering nodded.

“So it was you, I, or Lady Kenton,” said Long. “We know it wasn’t either of us . . .”

“So it must cancel out to her ladyship,” murmured Mannering.

He was on the alert now, for Long was being very persistent on the “it wasn’t either of us” note. Was it possible that the American *did* suspect him, and was playing him subtly ?

“That’s as I see it,” said Long.

Was he being sincere, or was he hinting? Mannering would have given a great deal to have known that, but he could only wait until Long had given him a further lead.

“Well,” he said, after a short pause, “that’s all right from our point of view. But the police will suspect you as much as Lady Kenton, if they suspect any of us.”

“You don’t have to tell me what they think about me,” said Long.

There was such bitterness in the words that Mannering looked at the other sharply. In that moment he realised that Gerry Long, for all his apparent ease of manner, for all his carelessness, was taking the affair to heart. The American felt the suspicion keenly. Just for a moment he looked desperate, and the fact came as something of a shock to Mannering.

He had not known the other many weeks, but he had told himself that Gerry Long was the last man in the world to worry much about being under suspicion. He told himself, too, that the young American’s financial position was such that it made that suspicion absurd. But the fact remained that Gerry Long was suffering keenly, and Mannering was worried. He changed his mind about going to the club.

“Let’s get along to my flat,” he suggested. “We can talk this

out, Gerry."

Long agreed. He did not speak during the walk to the flat, and the impression of desperation that Mannering had gathered on the previous night and which he had seen that morning was heightened. There was something on Gerry Long's mind that was worrying him a great deal more than seemed justifiable.

An hour later Mannering told himself that the American left the flat in a more cheerful frame of mind than when he had reached it. But Mannering was still worried. Long had discussed the theft thoroughly, but he had given Mannering no clue to the reason for his anxiety; yet that anxiety was very real, Mannering was sure.

"And all," murmured the cracksman to himself, "for Lady Kenton's pearls."

There was a sardonic smile on his lips as he unlocked the small desk against the wall and took the pearls from their hiding-place.

His words to Lady Kenton on the previous night had not been entirely empty. The string was beautifully graduated, worth every penny of five thousand pounds, and he wondered at the Dowager's extravagance. It had been an exceptional present, and there seemed no real reason for it. Certainly he was half wishing now that she had chosen something more modest.

He slipped it back into the hiding-place, lit his cigarette, prepared himself a small lunch, and then went to see Bristow. He had intended to call at the Yard in any case, but his talk with Gerry Long had made him precipitate the visit. He was worried about Long, and it was possible that he could clear the situation after a talk with Bristow.

Bristow was his usual cheerful self, and Sergeant Tring, looking rather pleased with life, touched his forehead and hoped that Mannering wasn't feeling tired after the previous day's exertions.

“No,” said Mannering, “and I’ve never seen anyone exert himself less than you do. Why didn’t you order the doors to be shut?”

“Too late when we discovered the stuff missing,” said Tring briefly.

When the sergeant had gone, closing the door quietly behind him, the detective offered cigarettes, and smiled grimly.

“We didn’t have much luck on our first job together,” he said, as Mannering struck a match.

Mannering laughed, a little uncertainly.

“You seem confoundedly happy about it,” he countered.

Bristow shrugged. Mannering gained another insight into the character of the man whom he was rapidly beginning to like and to admire.

“There isn’t much use in getting all het-up,” said the detective. “It doesn’t help us, nor anyone else. Besides, we always get our man in the long run.”

“Always ?” Mannering’s brows went up.

“Ninety-nine times in a hundred, anyhow,” said Bristow cheerfully.

“That suggests,” Mannering said slowly, “that you believe last night’s job was another one from your man — the Baron?”

Bristow nodded, and the other noticed the glint of admiration in the detective’s eyes. Bristow was so used to finding herself dealing with men of very moderate intellect that it was a pleasure to talk with someone who grasped the essentials quickly.

“I mean just that,” he said. “I think Baron — or the Baron; call him what you like — did the job. The dummies were slipped into Long’s pocket to make him seem . . .”

“Guilty?” asked Mannering.

“Well, to give that impression at first sight,” said Bristow. “You don’t have to look far before you realise Long was there for

the other man to hang a hat on. While Tring and the others were worrying about the American, off goes the real thief."

"A servant or a guest?"

Bristow rubbed his chin. He looked at Mannering thoughtfully, as though wondering just how far he could trust his amateur helper. Apparently his decision was favourable.

"Well," he said, "I'm not really sure, of course. But there's one guest who's being watched very carefully, Mannering, and whose bank-balance might not be quite so high as we think."

Mannering felt just the same fear as he had when he had been with Gerry Long. This time he managed to control himself, and he did not change colour; but he took another cigarette from his case and stuck it between his lips, glad of the cover it gave. It was disconcerting to be faced with a statement like that, and he did not enjoy it. His heart was beating fast, and several seconds passed before he spoke.

"Yes ?" he said, and he was surprised that his voice sounded natural.

"Yes," said Bristow heavily. "It seems fantastic, of course, but have you noticed, Mannering, that Lady Kenton has been present at every robbery ?"

"Lady *Kenton ?"*

Mannering stared at his man, completely dumbfounded; there was no need at all for the simulation of surprise; Long, then Bristow, with the same fantastic notion!

"Look at it through plain glasses," said Bristow, a little disgruntled by Mannering's obvious astonishment, "and you can see what I mean, can't you? There was that paltry brooch. She worried the life out of me about the thing, and it doesn't need a very long stretch of imagination to believe that she did it to keep me worrying about her as a victim. And she has been at *every* robbery."

Mannering took a deep breath, and forced himself to make the obvious rejoinder.

"So have I," he said.

Bristow grinned.

"Yes," he admitted, "I'm not forgetting you, but I'm hoping for the best. Seriously, though, why did she fall on that table last night? Did you see anything in the way for her to stumble over?"

Mannering shook his head. There was more relish in these conversations with the detective than in anything else he could remember, and he was beginning to enjoy himself thoroughly.

"There you are," said Bristow triumphantly. "She says that she doesn't know what caused her to slip, but she knows that something was in her way. Well — it's a tall story."

Mannering remembered, very vividly, how he had stretched his foot for the Countess to fall over.

"It is," he admitted. "But, damn it, Bristow — the Dowager Countess of Kenton . . ."

"Why not?" demanded Bristow, with vigour. "There's another thing, Mannering. That necklace, according to reports, was worth about five thousand pounds. Now, Lady Kenton hardly knew Marie Overndon. True, she knew the Wagnalls in America; but a five-thousand-pound wedding-gift!"

"That had occurred to me," said Mannering, very serious-

"It shouts suspicion," said Bristow grimly, "and that's one reason why I'm wary of it. I don't like things shouting at me. They call the wrong tune too often."

"There's one thing," said Mannering thoughtfully. "The first robbery the Baron was concerned in was of her own brooch, wasn't it? And it included a bang over the head for the housekeeper. I can imagine Lady Kenton doing all kinds of things, but not that."

"It might have given her the idea," said Bristow. He was obviously pleased with the theory, and it would take a lot to shake

him from it. Mannering felt that things could not have gone better. Lady Kenton wasn't in the slightest danger, for her reputation and her behaviour would stand the strictest examination. And while Bristow was barking up the wrong tree Mannering felt that he would be able to do a great many things.

Of course, Bristow would be forced away from the suspicion soon. He would realise from the reports he had heard that the Baron's activities — for instance, the lessons in lock-picking — were beyond the scope of the Dowager; but, while Bristow was chasing his hare, well and good.

But Mannering was still concerned about Gerry Long.

"The only reason Long can have for worrying," said Bristow, when Mannering mentioned the fact, "is a knowledge of the job. If he's not guilty . . ."

"And you don't think he is?" Mannering asked.

"No," said Bristow. Then he added more warily: "That is, I've my doubts, but if he is seriously concerned about the affair it's funny."

Mannering broke in, with some warmth.

"He wouldn't be the first man to be worried by an accusation which was unjust, would he?"

"No-o," admitted Bristow. He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke curling towards the ceiling. "When all's said and done, Mannering, the business is darned complicated. We are stopped because we don't know whether the real pearls or the dummies were on that table all day. It's quite possible that the actual theft took place before the wedding, and the little affair yesterday isn't connected with it."

"Then bust goes your case against Lady Kenton."

"I haven't got a case against Lady Kenton," said Bristow bluntly. "I've just got an idea that she might be more than she seems, and it will be worth your while to watch her. Er — that is, if

you're still anxious to carry on."

Mannering laughed, to the Inspector's obvious pleasure.

"I'm enjoying it," he said, "although I'm annoyed about the pearls. I suppose" — his eyes were fixed on Bristow curiously — "there's no doubt but that there *were* genuine pearls. I mean, if only dummies were given — and Gerry Long had the dummies . . ."

Bristow shook his head and smiled.

"That won't wash," he said. "We're not altogether mugs here, Mannering. We've had that purchase checked up. Lady Kenton actually bought the pearls and paid for them by cheque. She had them delivered by special messenger, and they reached the Park Square house the day before yesterday. They cost four thousand seven hundred and fifty pounds, and they were supplied by Daulby and Co., of Piccadilly."

Mannering chuckled with genuine humour.

"A complete history, eh? That certainly disposes of my hunch. So we're faced with the fact that the real pearls disappeared between yesterday morning and yesterday afternoon. The incident when I was there with Lady Kenton might mean something or might not."

"That's it," said Bristow, with a worried smile. "It's a ticklish job, I'll admit. I can't really make head-or-tail of it. Your friend Long makes another complication, and I can't get it out of my head that he's in it, somewhere."

"I wish we could clean it up, if only to clear him," said Mannering.

"I've got different motives, but I'd give a lot to catch our man," said Bristow. "Well — excuse me a minute, will you ?"

The telephone-bell rang out as he spoke. Mannering nodded and studied the ceiling, hearing Bristow's snapped words into the mouthpiece, but not gathering the drift of them.

He knew, however, that the message had concerned the affair

of the pearls, for Bristow turned round and was frowning as he replaced the receiver. Again that ridiculous feeling of panic swept through Mannering. Was it possible that he had been suspected all the time, and that the pearls had been found in the service-flat? The police weren't fools. . . .

Bristow's first words relieved him on that score, but worried him on another unexpectedly.

"It rather looks," admitted the detective, "as though we had our man, first time; or, at least, Tanker did . . ."

"Tanker?" Mannering spoke more to gain time than for any other reason. So they were back at Gerry Long.

Bristow smiled frostily.

"Sergeant Tring, or Tanker," he explained. "But the point is, Mannering, that Long has apparently done this kind of thing before . . ."

For the second time Mannering stared at the detective as if he was seeing a ghost. The statement seemed ridiculous, but Bristow had made it in all seriousness. *Gerry Long had done this kind of thing before!* God! Where would this end?

"This is getting beyond me," he admitted, after a pause. He lit a cigarette from the butt of his first, trying to picture Long in the role of a cracksman. Damn it, the idea was absurd!

Bristow pressed his lips together.

"The position's clarified now," he said. "You know Long's a collector of precious stones?"

"We've often compared notes," said Mannering.

"He doesn't seem to mind much how he collects them," said Bristow grimly. "We sent to New York for a report as soon as we heard of the trouble last night. They radioed back at once. Long has twice been mixed up in a scandal of this nature, and twice he's been able to buy his way out of trouble."

"Buy his way?" muttered Mannering.

“It can be done,” said Bristow. “Over here they’d plead that he suffered from kleptomania and . . . Well, being in his position, he might get off with a warning. Over there they’ve another way out. Anyhow, Long’s committed similar crimes on two separate occasions, and it’s pretty obvious what’s happened this time.”

“Yes,” murmured Mannering. He felt very hot and very uncertain. The complications were beginning to worry him. Whatever else happened, Long must not be victimised for this robbery.

“He slipped the genuine pearls away,” said Bristow, “but didn’t have a chance to put the dummies in their place. He had ample time, afterwards, to dispose of the genuine pearls and . . .”

Mannering shook his head, and Bristow stopped, very vividly aware of the other s aggressive tone.

“No,” said Mannering. “I’m sorry, Bristow, but I just don’t believe that Long took those pearls. If any man’s innocent Long is.”

“Then why is he worried?” snapped Bristow. “And what of the previous affairs in America?”

Mannering shrugged his shoulders.

“They fit in together,” he said. “Long feels that he is under suspicion. Remembering these other jobs, he’s worried, because he realises they’ll be connected. That’s reasonable, isn’t it?”

“It’s possible,” admitted Bristow. His eyes narrowed, and he was silent for several minutes. “You seem very friendly with Long,” he added at last, but the tone of his voice robbed the words of any offence.

Mannering smiled, and nodded his agreement.

“H’m,” said Bristow, a little heavily. “Well — I don’t need to ask you not to mention this American message to him.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Mannering evasively.

“See Long again.”

“When?”

“At once,” said Bristow, eyeing his companion uncertainly, and searching for the reasons for the questions.

Mannering’s smile was enigmatical.

“Let me tackle him,” he said. “You — or your men — can be listening in the next room. You’ll get the genuine story — if Long’s had anything to do with it.”

Bristow looked doubtful still.

“You think I’ll warn him?” Mannering laughed.

Bristow coloured a little at the thrust.

“I wouldn’t put it beyond you,” he admitted. “I’ll do that, though, if you like. But why?”

“It’ll be rough on him if he bangs right into you,” said Mannering. “He’s worried already. I’d like to let him down as easily as possible.”

Bristow laughed, but without much humour.

“Have it your own way,” he said. “Where are you thinking of talking with him?”

“My flat?” suggested Mannering.

“I’ll get there just after six,” said the detective, looking at his watch. “It’s just turned sour now. That should give you plenty of time.”

Mannering nodded, well satisfied with the concession, and shook hands with his companion.

But although his smile when he left the Yard was as wide as it had been when he had entered, he was inwardly feeling the strain. He had known that something serious had been at the back of Gerry Long’s mind that morning. Now he knew just what it was. The old scandals in which the other had been involved were bound to be revealed, and the young American had realised it.

But Mannering was not concerned with that. Long didn’t know it, but Mannering was the one man in the world who would not care about his crimes. Mannering’s concern was to make quite sure

that no suspicion of guilt in this case rested on Long. If it came to the point he would return the pearls.

"But that," he muttered to himself as he entered his flat, "wouldn't clear Gerry. It would be assumed that he'd been scared by the police and that he was trying to squeeze out of it. It would do more harm than good. And that means . . ."

He broke off, whistling to himself. He could see only one way to clear Gerry Long. It was dangerous, perhaps, but there would be a zest about it. . . .

Mannering stopped whistling, and smiled to himself. The lights dancing in his eyes would have mystified anyone who knew him. There was devilment, amusement, challenge. He knew, very suddenly, what he would do, and how he would do it.

For the next half-hour there was no sound in the flat but the scraping of a pen across paper and an occasional chuckle from Mannering as he wrote. Twice he screwed up and burned his efforts. The third pleased him more. He sealed it and addressed it. Then he hurried from the flat to a garage where he parked his car, drove from Piccadilly towards Victoria, and posted the letter at an ordinary pillar-box.

The glint in his eyes was a little harder, perhaps, than it had been; but the challenge was still there.

From a telephone-kiosk at Victoria Station he called Gerry Long, who was still staying with Colonel Belton. Gerry was in, and agreed to visit the service-flat just after six. From the tone of the other's voice Mannering knew that the American was still anxious.

Mannering smiled to himself, satisfied that he had done all he could to ease the situation. But it was still awkward, and he was not altogether happy.

Only the fact that he knew that Long could not make any admission about the robbery had persuaded him to arrange the interview with the police within hearing-distance. Bristow and his

men could not hear a thing that could cause Gerry trouble. On the other hand, if Mannering handled the interview well they might easily be convinced that the American knew nothing about the robbery.

The big stumbling-block was the existence of the dummy pearls.

Gerry Long *had* possessed those dummies, and the police would want to know the reason. Mannering was inclined to think that he knew it, and he worked it out in his mind.

The American was stone-mad; their conversations had proved that. The sight of precious stones, especially a rare piece that could not be bought, had seemed to make Gerry Long brood. In a man so young and so normal in every other respect it was strange; but Mannering had discovered enough in the past few years to prepare him for eccentricities in the most unlikely people. According to Mannering's reckoning, Gerry Long had bought the dummies, and had planned to exchange them for the real stones. It was a trick that anyone smart at sleight-of-hand could have contrived without much trouble.

Mannering chuckled to himself suddenly, and the weight of his depression lifted. He wondered what Gerry Long had thought when he had found the pearls missing; and he was inclined to believe that the American really suspected Lady Kenton. Detective-Inspector Bristow certainly did, but the real humour of the situation would come only if the Dowager discovered it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MANNERING IS TOO LATE

"SO YOU'VE HEARD OF THAT, HAVE YOU?" SAID GERRY LONG.

He looked haggard and worn. The effort which he had made until that morning to keep cheerful despite the difficulty of his position had been exhausted. He was scared of the possibility of arrest and conviction on the count of the pearls, and to Mannering there was something pitiful in Gerry's constant smoking of cigarettes; in his hands, which were never still; and in his nervous gestures. Twenty-four hours before the American had been one of the most self-possessed young men in London. Now he was very close to a nervous wreck.

"I've heard of them," said Mannering quietly.

They were sitting opposite each other in the Englishman's living-room. In the bathroom and the bedroom, Mannering knew, were Bristow and the sergeant with the curious name of Tanker — at that time Mannering did not know why the sergeant was so called, but certainly it was suitable — and he was hoping that they would get enough to convince themselves, even then, of Long's innocence.

"And — the police ?" Gerry's eyes were haggard.

"They're bound to have heard it," said Mannering, still quietly. He stretched his legs out, and looked evenly at the younger man. "Well, it's up to you, Gerry. I suppose you have been telling the truth ?"

There was no offence in the words, and there was no bitterness or resentment in Long's voice as he answered: "I have. I didn't touch the pearls."

Mannering nodded.

"Then you've nothing to worry about, surely? They can't prove you *did* take them if you didn't. It's rather nasty, I know, but .

. .”

“It’s more than that,” broke in Long bitterly. “I may as well be honest, Mannering. I tried the funny stuff twice before, and I was lucky to get away with it. I can’t explain *why* . . .”

“Don’t try,” said Mannering quietly.

Long’s expression showed his gratitude, but he did not speak of it.

“You can imagine,” he said, “that life wasn’t all honey afterwards. I made a fool of myself , and suffered for it. Now it’ll start again. You can guess this won’t be kept over here. Even if nothing happens officially the rumours will fly. You’d never believe how fast they travel . . .”

“What it amounts to,” said Mannering, with a deliberate challenge in his words, “is that you’re afraid to go back to New York unless you can disprove the suggestion ?”

There was a flash of spirit in Gerry’s reply.

“I’m afraid of nothing, he said quickly. “If I’ve got to face it I will. But — there’s a girl, Mannering.”

Mannering was very still for a moment, filled with a flood of understanding.

He had been puzzled by Gerry Long’s manner right from the start. Long did not create the impression that he was lacking in pluck, and his attitude over the pearl-robbery had been mystifying, to say the least of it. But if there was a girl . . .

“I see,” murmured Mannering, and the smile in his eyes was of sympathy, and not of amusement. He went on: “Well, you can only keep on denying your part, young fellow. Stick to the truth. It’ll see you through.”

Gerry nodded, without much conviction.

“I’ll try that,” he said quietly. “But there’s one thing I can’t do.”

Mannering looked his curiosity.

“I can’t explain away that dummy necklace,” said the American. “It must have been slipped into my pocket, but in view of all the circumstances the yarn looks pretty thin.”

Mannering nodded, and his smile was still encouraging.

“I shouldn’t worry,” he said. “The police will probably want to see you again. Stick to your story; you’ll be all right.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Then Long held out his hand impulsively.

“You’re a great guy,” he said, very simply.

Mannering suddenly remembered the wedding-reception.

“Here’s how!” he said, and for the first time that day Gerry Long laughed as though he meant it.

“That’s that,” said Mannering as Detective-Inspector Bristow and Sergeant Jacob (Tanker) Tring, having come from their hiding-places, awaited him. Gerry Long had gone, in a more cheerful frame of mind, Mannering believed, and the latter was satisfied that the talk had done some good. “If you care to believe Long had anything to do with it, you’re welcome. I don’t.”

Bristow fingered his moustache.

“It sounded genuine enough,” he admitted cautiously. “I’ll have a talk with him myself later in the evening.”

Mannering saw his visitors off, and went back into the room. Gerry Long had left twenty minutes before, and Mannering had strolled towards Piccadilly with the American, buying an evening paper on the way back. He had glanced at the front-page, and had seen what he wanted to see, but he did not show it to Bristow.

Despite the secrecy with which Colonel George Belton and the Wagnalls had handled the affair, the story of the robbery had leaked out. Mannering imagined that Mason, the stocky little private detective, had something to do with it. Mason had been angered by the way in which he had been treated on the previous day, and was of the type to want to get his own back.

The paper had exaggerated, of course. The five-thousand-pound necklace had grown into twenty thousand pounds" worth of jewels, and the story was as vague as it could possibly be. But the fact remained that publicity had been given to it, and, worse still, there was a list of the guests at the wedding on a centre-page. Gerry Long figured on that list.

Mannering felt restless. He was worried about Long, more than he had been before. The fact that there was a girl in the background complicated the affair. Men did strange things when they were in love, and Gerry Long was certainly in a state of very high nervous tension. In a few hours, Mannering knew he other man would have nothing to worry about, but those tew hours were the dangerous ones.

At half-past seven he telephoned Scotland Yard, to learn from Bristow that he had just seen Long at Belton's house.

"I'm glad it's over," said Mannering. "How did he seem?"

"Worried out of his life," said Bristow bluntly.

Mannering grunted, and rang off after a word or two more; he was in no mood tor a long conversation.

From his flat to Park Square was little more than half a mile, but something warned him to hurry for that journey. He hopped into a taxi, and waited impatiently for the short run to finish. He had a ten-shilling note ready for the driver, and did not wait to see the expression of surprise on that worthy's face when he received ten times the normal tare. A queer urge inside Mannering made him hurry up the steps.

A trim maidservant answered the door. She greeted him with a pleasant smile, and told him that he would find Mr Long in his room. The Colonel and Mr Wagnall were out.

"I'll go up," said Mannering.

His feeling of impending disaster was very strong at that moment. He had difficulty in preventing himself from running up

the stairs, and when he eventually reached the door of the American's room he grasped the handle and pushed hard.

The door was locked.

Mannering went very still for a moment. Then he reached a decision quickly, drew back across the wide passage, and hurled himself at the door. He might be making a fool of himself, but he would risk that.

The lock burst from its fastenings at the third attempt. Mannering went flying into the room, and a single glance told him that his fears had been justified. He caught a glimpse of Gerry Long, standing near the window, and he saw the gun in Long's right hand. For a split second Long hesitated, turning startled eyes towards the door. Then he raised the gun to his forehead. . . .

Mannering had gone sprawling across the floor, carried half-way into the room by the impetus of his effort. Somehow — afterwards he could never remember how — he contrived to twist his head so that he could see Gerry. The

American's face, deathly white and thrown, into ghastly relief by the grey darkness of the gun, was like that of a ghost.

Mannering's heart was pounding madly.

He knew that if he tried to get to his feet and rush the other he would be too late. A second lay between Gerry Long and eternity — and if Gerry died Mannering would never forget why.

"God!" he moaned, and it was a supplication.

He fastened his hand round the leg of a stiff-backed chair near him. He was still moving along the floor as his fingers found their hold, and he hardly knew how he rallied strength enough to lift the chair off the ground and throw it towards Long. As if in a nightmare he saw the chair going, saw the American dodge it instinctively, heard it thud against the wall and hit Long on the rebound; then, fast upon it, heard the report of the gun!

The explosion echoed through the room, sharp and ominous.

Still on the floor, Mannering saw very clearly the wisp of smoke from the gun, the mark on Gerry's forehead; he saw the other's eyes close, saw his body begin to sag, heard the gun clattering, and then watched, fascinated, as Gerry slumped downward.

Mannering's forehead was covered with sweat as he started to clamber to his feet. He was staring at Gerry Long's motionless figure, and he felt afraid. . . .

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SENSATION

THE SHOCK OF THE SHOOTING NUMBED MANNERING's MIND, but it was only for a moment. His brain cleared very quickly. He heard the sudden commotion below-stairs, a servant's voice raised in alarm, and, very clearly, Lady Mary Overndon's voice telling the girl not to make a fool of herself.

"Thank God!" muttered Mannering, for he knew that Lady Mary would use her head if no one else could.

He was on his feet in a trice, and hurried to the door. The noise of footsteps coming up the stairs grew louder. As he reached the passage he saw Lady Mary approaching, very grim and very determined.

She stopped in surprise when she saw him.

"John — you! I didn't know you were here."

"Just arrived," said Mannering. His face was grim and his voice hard. "A spot of bother, Lady Mary. Keep the servants quiet, will you, and send for a doctor who can be trusted to hold his tongue."

"Gerry?" said Lady Mary quietly.

Mannering nodded.

"He's not. . ." There was a glimmer of real alarm in the old woman's eyes.

"No," said Mannering, "or it wouldn't matter what doctor you sent for. I must get back."

He turned, pushing the door to as Lady Mary moved away; and then for the first time he really looked at Gerry Long. He had told Lady Mary that the other wasn't dead. For his own part he wasn't sure. He had spoken on impulse, with the wish father to the thought. . . .

Now he looked down at Gerry Long, and saw that usually

cheerful face robbed of its colour, saw the ugly wound in the forehead, and the blood coming from it. Very quickly, but moving deliberately, Mannering knelt down and raised the other's head. With his left hand he felt for the pulse . . . .

It was beating very faintly.

The relief which surged through Mannering was almost overpowering, but he realised that the danger was not past, and that fact sobered him. The chair, he knew, had made Gerry move, and the bullet had gone slantwise across the forehead, instead of through the temple; but even if the wound was not fatal complications might prove so.

Complications! Mannering uttered a mirthless little laugh. The complications that had followed the affair of , Marie Overndon's pearls were beyond words, and they were still multiplying. But, damn it, he mustn't think of them now!

He hurried into the bathroom, took a bowl of tepid water, a sponge, and a towel into the bedroom, and started to wash the wound. It was not a pleasant job, but in the circumstances Mannering could not be squeamish.

With another sigh of relief he saw that the wound was not very deep. The bullet had scored the bone at one point, but as far as he could see had not broken it. Gerry was still breathing fairly regularly, and the Englishman did not ad-minister a restorative. He considered it wiser to wait for the doctor, who would be able to advise the safest course.

Lady Mary had obviously exerted all her influence to get the doctor into the house quickly, for Mannering had only just finished bathing the wound when someone tapped softly at the door. He hurried across the room as Lady Mary called out: "I'm here, John."

He opened the door, to see Lady Mary waiting with a tall grey-faced man he had seen somewhere before. The doctor hurried into the room as Mannering pointed towards the wounded man.

“Is he . . .” began Lady Mary again.

“He’ll be all right,” said Mannering, and he managed a smile that was not wholly forced. His relief at the escape the younger man had had was very real, and he dared hardly think of the effect Long’s death would have had on him. He felt sick as he realised that the theft of the Overndon pearls had nearly resulted in the American’s suicide.

“You’re sure?” asked Lady Mary, and Mannering saw that she was looking very old and very weary.

“Quite sure,” he said, pulling a chair towards her. “But sit down.”

She smiled at him as she obeyed gladly enough.

“I often wish,” she said, “you’d married into the family, John.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” countered Mannering.

As he spoke he was thinking that if he had done, if Marie Overndon had reacted differently when he had told her that he had been worth a thousand a year, neither more nor less, this wouldn’t have happened. But it might have been worse, thank God! That was the thought that echoed time and time again through his mind.

“Who’s the doctor?” he asked.

“Saunders,” said Lady Mary. “As reliable as they’re made, my dear. There won’t be any gossip about it, that’s certain . . .”

She broke off as Saunders turned round from his patient.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” he said, with a quick smile. “Slight concussion, Lady Mary, and the wound, but nothing to worry about.” He looked at Mannering somewhat oddly. “There’s a rather nasty bruise on his shoulder,” he added.

Mannering did not speak, but he shrugged his shoulders.

The bruise, he knew, had been caused by the chair — and how he blessed it!

The doctor smiled a little, but made no comment.

“I’ll get him to bed,” said Lady Mary, as if she were speaking

of a child. “Could you find me a nurse, doctor?”

Saunders promised that he would, and went off quickly.

When Mannering left Gerry’s room half an hour later the American was still unconscious, but his breathing was better. It was certain that he would regain consciousness very soon. A nurse, sent round by Saunders, had taken charge, and Mannering was not sorry to have a rest. He felt utterly weary and spent from the reaction.

Lady Mary watched him pouring out a stiff peg of whisky, and she suggested surprisingly — for she rarely touched spirits — that she should have a tot herself. Lady Mary was continually saying and doing things that were unexpected, and the manner of her request made him smile.

She sipped the drink gingerly, but pronounced it welcome. Then she smiled at him.

“What made you come along?” she demanded.

Mannering managed to laugh.

“I’d seen Gerry earlier this afternoon,” he said, “and I’d heard that the police were going to question him. It struck me that he was in a pretty bad way, and I felt anxious.”

“Blast those bloody pearls!” said Lady Mary very suddenly.

Mannering was so completely taken aback that he could only stare. Lady Mary gave a rather grim little chuckle.

“It’s surprising,” she said, “what some of us old ones are capable of, young man. I said it, and I meant it. Those pearls started the trouble, and if Emma Kenton had had more sense than to spend five thousand silly pounds on a paltry necklace this wouldn’t have happened.”

“But there were other things there,” protested Mannering.

“Don’t try and make me logical,” snapped Lady Mary. She smiled, robbing her words of any offence. “And don’t forget, young man, that she’s talked for weeks about these pearls. Anyone has had ample opportunity to get dummies made . . .”

"You seem to know the whole story," said Mannering easily. Inwardly he was remarking on the publicity that Lady Kenton had given to the pearls. If Bristow wanted something else to heighten his suspicions of the Dowager here it was.

"I made George talk," said Lady Mary, with a faint smile. "He's a dear, is George, but he couldn't keep a secret from anyone with two eyes in his head. It's a nasty business, but it won't hurt Marie, and it might do Emma a bit of good."

Lady Kenton, thought Mannering, wasn't very popular. He lit a cigarette, and a few moments later refused Lady Mary's offer to stay for a day or two.

"I'll wait until the Colonel gets back," he said, "in case you're feeling jumpy . . ."

"Jumpy?" snapped Lady Mary. "What have I got to feel jumpy about? Don't talk nonsense, John! But I'd like you to stay."

Mannering smiled to himself at her change of front. The next half-hour passed quickly, but he was glad when Belton and Wagnall returned, and when their congratulations on his rescue were over. The only remark which interested him, from those two gentlemen, was Wagnall's: "But I wish I knew why he had those dummies, all the same."

So did Mannering. He *felt* uneasy *about the dummy* pearls, and he puzzled over them for some time.

And then he reminded himself of the jolt the police would get on the following morning, and he smiled.

Gretham Street, Chelsea, where Detective-Inspector Bristow lived with his wife and family, looked very much the same that morning — the morning following Gerry Long's unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide — as it did on every other morning. The other thirty-seven housewives dispatched their husbands to their daily tasks, and only the Bristow household continued to slumber.

Bristow had been working very late on the previous night, and he had persuaded his wife to forget the alarm-clock. It was nearly half-past eight when the detective turned over in bed, gazed dreamily out of the window, saw his wife sleeping very soundly, smiled, pressed his lips against her hair without disturbing her, and then crept very gently out of bed.

He was a very happy man in his home-life, and nothing pleased him more than to get his wife an early cup of tea without first waking her. He enjoyed himself so much that morning that he had taken the tea upstairs and enjoined his daughter to wake up — his two sons, at that time, were holidaying in North Wales — before looking at the paper.

When he did look he just stared. He saw nothing but the printed blur. He could hardly believe his eyes. Things like this didn't happen. *They couldn't!*

But this had.

Bristow lit a cigarette with a hand which trembled in spite of his efforts to control it, and not until he had drawn at it several times did he trust himself to read farther than the headlines. For the headlines — due to the fact that news was scarce and that there had been no real sensation for several weeks — were sprawled right across the front-page in heavy black letters:

THIEF CHALLENGES SCOTLAND YARD WHO IS THE BARON?

The Baron! Bristow muttered the name to himself a dozen times. *The Baron!* The name that had been on his tongue for months past, the elusive and, until that morning, secretive and comparatively unknown name of the thief who had started *with the Dowager* Countess *of Kenton's brooch and who had* continued with a dozen or more thefts, completely hoodwinking the police every time, was now in black and white in front of him.

The Baron . . .

Bristow swore as he had rarely sworn in his life.

As he read the story he scowled. He was still inclined to think that he was dreaming, that this thing couldn't be true, but the facts were there in front of him.

Centred beneath the headlines was a letter, printed in bold type, and obviously written very carefully. Before it was a statement that the *Morning Star* had the story on the best authority.

I have been working against the police for some months, without the slightest cause for worry. At the house of Colonel George Belton I took the pearl-necklace that has since caused so much publicity and speculation. My method was simple, which may explain the ease with which the burglary was accomplished. But simplicity begets monotony. It occurs to me that this letter may stir the police to greater efforts to apprehend.

THE BARON

Detective-Inspector William Bristow read this delightful effort three times. Finally he began to mutter. And then — it should be remembered that Old Bill always had a habit of doing the unexpected — he began to laugh.

He laughed until Mrs Bristow began to wonder whether he had finished going off his head — she felt sure that that early-morning tea had been the first stage — and she stumbled downstairs, clutching her dressing-gown about her, followed closely by Joan, their daughter. The sight of the Inspector, pyjama-clad, ruffled, and a little sleepy-eyed, but roaring with laughter, would have struck any policeman at the Yard as uproariously funny, but it made his family a little apprehensive.

"Bill," said Mrs Bristow firmly, "stop it! You'll have the whole street think you're off your head."

Bristow made a great effort to control himself.

“Street?” he gasped. “Only the street ? What about the rest of the town, m’dear? Look at that. Look at it!”

Mrs Bristow looked, and her comely face straightened into hard lines. She was very touchy on anything which affected the reputation of the police, but she knew her husband.

“You’re a hard nut,” she said, not without pride. “It would make me — *mad!”*

“It’ll make him mad before it’s finished,” said Old Bill obscurely. “How soon can you make breakfast, m’dear ? I’ll have to get to the Yard quickly. Lynch will be getting a mouthful ready after this, to say nothing of the Commissioner.”

“I can’t understand why you laughed,” admitted Mrs Bristow, as she investigated the larder.

“Can’t you?” asked Old Bill, pouring water from the kettle into his shaving-mug. “It’s simple, Anne. I laughed because it’s funny. The funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Superintendent Lynch, as large, placid, and red-faced as ever, was inclined to agree when, three-quarters of an hour later, Bristow reached the Yard. But Lynch wasn’t happy.

“Everyone doesn’t think with us, Bill. The A.C . . .”

It was nearly eleven o’clock, and Lynch had been at the Yard for some time. When the Assistant-Commissioner was brought into the conversation which Bristow had started with the Superintendent, Bristow knew that his worst fears were confirmed.

“He’s started on it already, has he ?” he asked. “What does he say?”

“Very stiff and very formal,” said Lynch cheerfully. “That man hasn’t smiled since he took over, two years ago.”

“Not even at this ?” asked the Inspector.

“Least of all at this,” said Lynch. “And, to make it worse, one of our own men — Wrightson — caused the trouble.”

Bristow frowned, without understanding.

"But the Baron . . ." he began.

"The Baron did have the decency to write to us," said Lynch heavily. "Wrightson — he's never liked you, Bill-opened the letter, and, like a damned fool, let the *Morning Star* man see it. If it had gone to the papers direct it would have been chucked in the waste-paper-basket, but, coming straight from the horse's mouth . . . Anyhow," Lynch broke off, with a shrug, "it's no use worrying over spilt milk."

"No," said Bristow grimly, "but I'll give Wrightson something to worry about one day."

Lynch shrugged his shoulders, although he could sympathise with the Inspector. Between Bristow and Wrightson — one of the new school on whose toes Old Bill had trodden several times for breaches of police-regulations — there was no love lost, and although it was impossible to suggest that Wrightson had deliberately let the letter get into the Press, Bristow was prepared to believe that that had happened.

Bristow forced himself away from thoughts of the other Inspector, however, and returned to the pressing subject.

"So the A.G. is really nasty?"

Lynch shrugged his heavy shoulders again.

"He says, and we can't argue, that we've been too slack over the Baron, and that if we don't get our man within the week we'll be the laughing-stock of London."

"I shouldn't be surprised," admitted Bristow, a little glumly. "But I would be more surprised if we did it. He'll be very careful for the next few weeks."

"You sound as cheerful as Tanker," said Lynch.

"You know these jobs as well as I do," said Bristow.

The Superintendent pulled a face at the comment.

"All right," he said. "Do all you can. Er — that man

Mannering. He's helping you ?"

Bristow flushed a little. "How'd you know?"

"I've seen you talking to him," said Lynch, "and I've assumed you weren't questioning him, so . . . Anyhow, he's the type who might be useful."

"He's got his head screwed on properly," said Bristow slowly. "He didn't make any bones about saying young Long wasn't in the pearls job, and it certainly looks as if he's right."

"Unless Long's the Baron," suggested Lynch, folding his arms across his great waistcoat.

"No luck," said Bristow. "The first half-dozen Baron jobs started back in March and April. Long's only been in England since early May. We can rule him out on that count. But . . ."

The Inspector hesitated. Lynch waited patiently, partly because he was a patient man, and partly because he knew that Bristow was arguing with himself. The big Superintendent was a student of men, and he knew just how to get the best out of his own.

"But," went on Bristow at last, "there's one other possibility. Mannering doesn't think much of it."

"Who have you got in mind ?" asked Lynch.

"The Dowager Lady Kenton," said Bristow, eyeing his Superintendent evenly. "I know it sounds against ail reason, but . . ."

"I'll see what I can find out about her bank-balance," said Lynch placidly. "It still beats me why she paid five thousand pounds for that wedding-present."

Bristow was surprised — not for the first time, by a long way — at the comprehensiveness of Lynch's grasp of his job. And he began to think very seriously of that rather short-tempered but not unpopular lady the Dowager. She was not really unpopular, that is, in any place but the Yard, where her name was very nearly poison.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LORNA OFFERS A BARGAIN

EMMA KENTON HAD READ OF THE ROBBERY IN AN EVENING paper, and she claimed that it was Fate that had made her send out for one when usually she preferred all her news in the morning. She had been too overcome to make any protest to the police or anyone else at first, and she had taken a strong sleeping-draught, hoping to awaken next morning fresh for the fray. She was a persistent woman, as Bristow could have testified, and at times she could be militant; she felt the loss of the pearls very keenly.

The morning paper — she took the *Morning Star* — brought the story of the Baron's letter to the Yard.

Lady Kenton stared at it for fully five minutes; then, as though in a daze, she reached for the telephone and called for Lady Fauntley, feeling the need of someone to talk to.

Both Hugo Fauntley and his wife were out of town, but Lorna was in.

"My dear," gasped Lady Kenton, "I just can't — it's too much — I don't really know — how . . ."

"But it needn't worry you," said Lorna soothingly, realising what the trouble was. "It's Marie's loss, not yours."

"It's the *principle* of the thing," mourned Lady Kenton. "Lorna dear, could you pop in for half an hour? It's all so upsetting, and your mother . . ."

"I'll come," said Lorna.

"Good girl," said Lady Kenton.

At the other end of the line Lord Fauntley's very strong-willed daughter sat looking bleakly ahead of her. Many people who knew her would have said that she was in a "black" mood, which meant that she would probably retire to the Chelsea studio for days on end, and paint or mope.

She did nothing of the kind this morning.

After replacing the receiver she rang for her maid, and half an hour later was ready for the visit to Lady Kenton. She was not looking forward to it, but it presented one possible way out of a difficulty — and an unforeseen difficulty. Lorna laughed, a high-pitched, rather defiant laugh. She looked overpoweringly beautiful at that moment, but her eyes, dark, probing, restless, held uneasiness.

"If Mr Mannering should call," she told her maid, "I expect to be back for lunch."

"Very good, ma'am."

Lorna left the Langford Terrace house and walked briskly to Regent's Park, where she found Lady Kenton — whose home was one of the most imposing in that district — distracted almost to tears.

"It's such a *deliberate* affront," complained Lady Kenton for the fourth time in ten minutes. "I always did know that foolish policeman wasn't any good, but this is *too* much. It's the last word, my dear."

"You can't very well blame the policeman," said Lorna, with a quick smile. "He's probably feeling as badly about this as you. Or worse."

"Worse! I should think that he feels the smallest thing on — on — I should think he feels *insignificant.* If I see him again I'll let him know . . . Oh, bother die girl! What is it, Morgan?"

My lady's maid was used to the differing tempers of her mistress, and kept a straight face as she entered the room and announced Inspector Bristow.

Lorna also contrived not to smile while Lady Kenton swallowed hard, straightened the shawl she insisted on wearing in the privacy of her home, and said, "Send him up."

Lorna could see the light of battle in the older woman's eyes;

she was amused, but not so much as she would have been if she could have forgotten the fact that she wanted something desperately from Lady Kenton. She was anxious to humour Emma, but her sympathies in the coming interview would be with the Inspector, who would doubtless get through a trying half-hour with admirable patience.

The Inspector looked sprucer than ever. His shoes were polished until they were almost blue, his suit was perfectly cut, his tie, socks, and shirt matched well, and his trim moustache, yellowed in the centre with the smoke of his interminable cigarettes, was freshly cropped.

He bowed to the two ladies so punctiliously that the older woman was slightly appeased, and he addressed himself to Emma Kenton. The smile on his lips was exactly right.

"I very much dislike bothering you, m'lady, but there are one or two points . . ."

Lady Kenton's brow was dark, and the question she had been preparing from the moment that Bristow had been announced seemed to burst from her.

"Why wasn't I told, Inspector?"

Bristow obviously expected something of the sort, and he answered quickly.

"You mean about the robbery, m'lady?"

"What else could I mean?" demanded Lady Kenton. "It's outrageous, Inspector, outrageous! I should have been told immediately — immediately!"

"I don't quite see," said Bristow gently, "how it was necessary to worry you before, m'lady."

Lorna silently applauded him, and her regard for his diplomacy rose considerably. Bristow, as Mannering could have told her, was a likeable man.

"But why . . ." began Lady Kenton.

Bristow interrupted, without apparent intent to stop her.

"I understand it was a gift from you to Mrs Wagnall," he said, and Lorna had a slight shock; it was the first time she had heard Marie Overndon given her new tide. "And as it was that lady's property, it was not a matter I could very well report to you, m'lady."

Lady Kenton looked at him doubtfully. Her chief complaint was that she had not been consulted the moment the robbery had been discovered, and now Bristow had disarmed her completely. But she would not give in without a fight.

"My interest was obvious," she said coldly.

The next move was plainly Bristow's, and he handled it deftly.

"Of course," he said, "and I am hoping you will be able to help me a great deal. It's just possible," he added before the Dowager could interrupt, "that the robbery took place while — or immediately after — you were in the room with the presents, m'lady. There are one or two questions . . ."

"Questions?" snapped Lady Kenton.

"That I would appreciate your answering," said the Inspector, gently but firmly.

Looking at the other woman, Lorna told herself that Emma was getting old. The Dowager looked careworn and a little faded at that moment. The questions threatened to bother her.

The Inspector was wondering whether it was possible that this little old woman could be the Baron. He was also beginning to tell himself that it wasn't, and he doubted even whether he had ever seriously thought so.

"Just what happened when you slipped against the table?" he asked.

Lady Kenton clasped her hands together, and her expression was acid.

"Surely you've heard all that could be said about that?"

“It’s necessary,” said Bristow, “to check up on every statement, m’lady. A slight difference between two separate statements might mean a great deal. You appreciate that, I am sure.”

Her ladyship nodded now, as if to suggest that she fully understood the reason for the Inspector’s call, but didn’t consider it a sufficient one.

“I slipped,” she said.

“Against what?”

“The table, of course.”

Bristow accepted the words patiently.

“What made you slip?” he asked next.

“I don’t know,” said her ladyship. “I just slipped.”

“But it isn’t likely that you fell over without striking something first,” said Bristow.

“I stubbed my foot on the table-leg,” said Lady Kenton, bristling.

The Inspector rubbed his chin, and Lorna thought that he was beginning to feel exasperated.

“That was what I understood,” he said, “but I don’t quite see how it was possible, Lady Kenton. We have examined the table, and there was nothing projecting from it to cause you to stumble. It is a period piece, supported by a centre leg only,”

“It might have been the carpet,” said Lady Kenton, annoyed beyond measure at discovering that the policeman knew a period piece when he saw one.

“It’s parquet flooring,” said the Inspector, “and it was not carpeted that day,”

Her ladyship glared at him.

“Are you suggesting that I’m lying?” she demanded, and her voice sounded very strident in the small room.

Bristow’s doubts came back with a rush. His manner grew

more placating than ever, but he was on the alert for the slightest slip she might make.

"Nothing of the kind," he assured her quickly. "It is just possible that you slipped on the polished floor, m'lady."

"It is," snapped Lady Kenton.

"Yet you remember stubbing your foot against something," persisted Bristow.

"Distinctly,"

"It wasn't the carpet or a table-leg," said the Inspector very carefully. "Can you remember . . ."

"It might have been Gerry Long's foot," said Lady Kenton, "or Mr Mannering's. I really don't think that it's important, Inspector, and if you don't mind . . ."

The Inspector accepted his dismissal without a protest.

He knew that Lady Kenton had the ear of a number of prominent politicians, and he did not desire to be rebuked for zeal in that quarter. If events developed to give him a substantial charge against her ladyship it would be a different matter.

But as he went into the street he was very doubtful whether he would ever have such a charge to make. It didn't seem feasible that the frail, bad-tempered old woman could have organised a robbery of that nature; it seemed less likely that she could have sent that letter to the Yard. He did wonder, however, whether she was thinking of shielding someone else. That would explain a great deal.

As he hurried towards Scotland Yard in a taxi he felt more worried than he had been all day. The effect of that challenge in the *Morning Star* was exasperating him. The disapproval of the A.G. was unpleasant.

"I'll get him," muttered the Inspector — of the Baron — suddenly. I'll get him !"

"I've a good mmd," said Lady Kenton viciously, as the door closed

behind the spruce figure of the detective, “to complain to Nigel about him. Asking me questions like that . . .”

“He obviously didn’t like the job,” suggested Lorna.

Lady Kenton looked placated, and managed a wintry smile.

“I really don’t know how I should have got on without you, Lorna dear. I’m sure I should have lost my temper, or something silly like that, and the next thing I should have known would be to find myself in a police cell. I’m sure something dreadful like that will happen one day.”

Lorna chuckled.

“That man would do anything,” said Lady Kenton, roused immediately. “I’m convinced he came here to try and trap me into making some admission. I can’t bear the man. He was almost rude to me several times when I was inquiring about my brooch, and I have never seen it since.”

Lorna sighed to herself. She had hoped that the brooch topic would not crop up, for once Emma got on to that and the inefficiency of the police she was non-stop; and the younger woman felt that her patience was at a low ebb that morning.

Lady Kenton really wearied of the subject for once, however, and after one or two almost habitual remarks deserted it.

Over a cup of coffee she inquired about Lorna’s painting. It was a subject the younger woman had wanted to introduce, but policemen and pearls had side-tracked anything but a crude approach. The opportunity made her feel more cheerful.

“I’m not selling a great deal,” she said slowly.

“Selling?” Lady Kenton looked at her sharply. “You don’t *have* to sell, do you? You do it for pleasure. Selling . . .”

“Of course I sell,” said Lorna. “I’m an artist, my dear, not an amateur. It isn’t the money that counts, but my ability to earn it is the test. . .”

Lady Kenton interrupted her with characteristic contrariness

as she poured out another cup of coffee.

"It *does* count, Lorna, and don't make the mistake that it doesn't. Money matters. Your father will always tell you that, I'm sure."

Lorna laughed, and regarded her cup.

"I know," she said. "I refused an offer for a picture six months ago, and I've never heard the last of it from Dad."

"Why did you refuse it?" demanded Lady Kenton.

The offer wasn't big enough," said Lorna. "It's worth four hundred at least, and I was offered only two-fifty,"

"When you reach my age," said her ladyship thoughtfully, "you will realise it's never wise to refuse money. Tell me about the picture, my dear,"

Lorna smiled, and described it at some length. She was very nearly sure that Lady Emma Kenton had fallen to the bait, and that before the day was out the picture would be her property, and that Lorna would hold the Kenton cheque for three hundred pounds. Lady Kenton could never resist a bargain.

And Lorna Faundey badly needed three hundred pounds.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A CLOSE SHAVE

THE LETTER THAT MANNERING HAD SENT TO THE YARD HAD achieved its object, thanks to the carelessness of Wrightson and the wide-awake *Morning Star* man. It had cleared Gerry Long of suspicion in the robbery, but Mannering found that it was a question of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Inspector Bristow was undoubtedly worried about his failure on the job. His anxiety cancelled Mannering's anticipated pleasure in a conversation with the policeman soon after Bristow had left Regent's Park and Lady Kenton. It was impossible to revel in another man's discomfort, and Mannering began to wish that he had never been approached by Bristow. He liked the Inspector, and he disliked the idea of stabbing the man in the back.

Before he left the Yard, however, he was more cheerful.

Superintendent Lynch, who was fond of saying that he had eyes at the back of his head, came into the office, nodded cheerfully to Bristow, shook hands with Mannering, and introduced himself.

"Been talking with the A.C.," he told the Inspector. "I'm coming on the Baron job with you, Bill. I've told him that I think it's a bigger problem than he fancies, and he's in a better temper than he was yesterday."

Bristow's face cleared. Lynch looked placidly at Mannering.

"We have a dog's life sometimes," he said. "It's all right when we're going smoothly, but when Old Bill makes a slip or I come a cropper we get a proper shaking-up. But it all blows over. What's your theory about the Baron, Mr Mannering?"

For a fraction of a second Mannering was afraid that he had given something away, but Lynch was reaching across the desk to help himself to one of Bristow's cigarettes, and the moment's respite saved Mannering from making a *faux pas.*

“I haven’t one,” he said, coolly enough.

“That’s an advantage,” said Lynch, looking at him through a haze of smoke. “I’m glad you’re helping, anyhow.”

They chatted for five minutes, but nothing of importance was mentioned. Mannering left the Yard, smiling cheerfully to himself. He went to Park Square, chatted for ten minutes with Gerry Long, who had recovered as well as had been expected, and who was sitting up in bed. Gerry was sorry for himself, and mad with himself. Mannering told him to forget it.

“It’s so darned silly,” said Long, “that I can’t think of any way of thanking you, Mannering,”

“The chance may crop up,” smiled the other.

He went to his flat, took the Overndon pearls from their hiding-place soon afterwards, and went to Aldgate. On the way — he travelled by taxi — he altered his appearance sufficiently to make reasonably sure that no casual acquaintance would recognise him. At a small barber’s shop in a turning off the High Street he waited for a bald-headed, jolly-faced man to waddle into the back-parlour which he had entered.

“Morning, Mr Mayle,” The bald-headed man wheezed the greeting cheerfully. He was tremendously fat, a fact emphasised by a pair of slacks let out at the waist with a material different in colour and quality, an Oxford shirt without buttons, opening to reveal an expanse of soft, dimply flesh, and a pair of carpet-slippers.

“Same as usual for you, sir?”

Mannering nodded, and smiled.

The fat man grinned, revealing teeth that were surprisingly white and strong. Mannering waited for him patiently, knowing that Harry Pearce could not be hurried. The barber did many things besides cutting hair and shaving week-old stubble. Mannering had been introduced to him by Flick Leverson, that philosophical fence who was now in gaol. Harry supplied all kinds of make-up, and

even helped to apply it. He asked no questions, relied on the generosity of his customers for payment, and was not averse to doing a job for nothing. In that strange world of small thieves and petty rogues a man might be penniless one day and rich the next; Harry knew that his credit would rarely be stretched to breaking-point.

He knew Mannering — a Mannering disguised well enough to deceive the casual eye, or the eye of a man who did not know him in regular life — as Mr Mayle, and he appeared to accept the name for gospel. He supplied him with the rubber cheek-pads and the teeth-covering with which Mannering helped to turn himself into the swarthy, full-faced man who visited Dicker Grayson occasionally for the sale of stolen goods. Mannering had discovered that disguise was not so difficult as he had imagined, and the main essential was to act up to the facial alterations.

It was middle afternoon when Mannering reached the wharf in which Grayson worked. That pink-and-white doll of a man was genial and friendly. He knew that he could get good stuff from the other, and when he reached a fair price he knew that there would be no unnecessary haggling. They had now handled several jobs together to their mutual advantage.

Mannering adopted his usual methods.

He grunted in response to Grayson's "How are you?", slipped his rubber container from his pocket, upturned it, and let the Overndon pearls stream on to the desk, all without a change of expression.

Grayson's smile disappeared. His eyes were very hard as he stared at the prize.

"Where'd you get those ?" he demanded in his disconcertingly deep voice.

"That's neither here nor there," growled Mannering. "How much ?"

Grayson fingered the pearls. The dim light of the great warehouse prevented him from seeing their true lustre, but he was a keen judge, and he knew what he was handling.

"The Overndons," he murmured, and for once his voice was very soft.

The sense that had served Mannering well so often came to the fore again. There were times when he had to show spirit and worry Grayson. This was one of them.

He leapt from his chair with an oath. His eyes were blazing, and his lips turned back over his dirty-looking teeth; he seemed at that moment a typical seaman used to rough-houses and prepared to start one now.

"Gut that!" he snarled. "Stick to yer business, Grayson, and don't try the funny stuff, see, or . . ."

His large, gloved hands clenched, and the pink-and-white man flinched away, but with words and a smile equally conciliatory. He knew that he had broken an unwritten law.

"That's all right, that's all right," he said suavely. "I shouldn't have asked, I know, but these things have had rather a lot of — er — publicity, haven't they?"

"That's as may be," growled Mannering. "All I want from you's a price. Name it,"

He was enjoying himself. There was a spice of danger in his meetings with Grayson that he liked; and there was need for him to be on his guard all the time. It enabled him to get used to the acting necessary for his part as the Baron, and he realised the more practice he had the better.

Grayson muttered something under his breath. Then: "They're dangerous things to handle, very dangerous, my friend,"

"You can smother 'em till the fuss is over."

Grayson's eyes were expressionless.

"So can you," he said.

Mannering grunted again, and stretched his hand across the table. He knew how to handle Dicker Grayson, and he knew too that he must never let the other man best him.

"Sure," he said. "So can I. And find another smasher, mister. Let me take 'em,"

Grayson covered the pearls with his plump pink hands.

"There's no need to act like that," he said placatingly. "Don't forget I take all the risks, son. Five hundred,"

Mannering knew this game by heart.

"Three thousand," he grunted.

"I'm not a millionaire," Grayson snapped; then he smiled suddenly, as though he realised that this fencing was useless. "We know each other too well to play, son. I'll give you twelve hundred,"

Mannering nodded. He seemed disinterested now he had a reasonable offer. One of the things Grayson liked about him was his clean-cut acceptance or refusal of a figure.

"Small notes," Mannering stipulated.

"I'll get 'em," promised Grayson.

It took the receiver twenty minutes to get the notes. Mannering was used to waiting, and he occupied his time by looking out of the window across the stretch of muddy water that carries the shipping of the world. The Thames and its banks were alive. Through the closed windows came the raucous sound of men's voices, the blaring of sirens, the clanking of chains, the chug-chug of a giant crane, the continual thump of bales of merchandise being dropped into hatches or barges. There was something fascinating about it, and Mannering forgot that he was acting a part

Something entirely unexpected brought him back to the realisation of it.

He was gradually accustoming himself to the need for constant wariness. It was the unexpected, the emergency which was

created in a flash, that was more likely to cause him trouble than anything else. And an emergency came now.

He saw Grayson hurrying into the warehouse yard, and half-turned towards the centre of the room. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the man who followed Grayson . . . .

Mannering's eyes narrowed, and his heart beat fast.

It was Tanker — Sergeant Jacob Tring — Bristow's right-hand man!

There was no doubt about it, Mannering knew. Tanker was dressed in civilian clothes, and he carried them well for a policeman, but his stolid features and rather gloomy expression were unmistakable.

Did Grayson know ? There had been nothing on the face of the fence as he had hurried towards the warehouse to suggest that he had known that he was being followed, but Grayson was a wary bird. He would probably realise the danger, and act accordingly.

Mannering realised it very bitterly; this would happen now.

It looked as if the police were going to question Grayson. The life of a fence was a precarious one, he knew, and if the slightest rumour against him reached the ears of the police he would be raided without delay.

Was Tanker starting a raid? Or was he merely on an errand of inquiry?

It was one of the worst three minutes that Mannering had ever had. He kept looking out of the window, keeping well back in order to make as sure as possible that he was not seen. But what he saw himself made his blood race and his eyes feel hot.

The police-sergeant was not alone!

Three other men, well dressed when compared with the other inhabitants of the wharves, moved slowly towards the warehouse in which Mannering was waiting. The big man saw Grayson disappear, and then watched the plain-clothes men converge on the door. He

was thinking all the time of the Overndon pearls; their discovery by the police would finish him.

Mannering turned from the window quickly, but he had hardly reached the table when Grayson burst in. The fence knew all right, even though his expression was cool. He was breathing fast, and he slammed the door behind him.

"Move away!" he snapped, and Mannering obeyed.

Grayson, moving with astonishing speed, pressed a small protuberance in the surface of his desk. It looked no more than a knot of wood, but as his podgy fingers pressed on it a narrow slot was revealed in the side-panel. Grayson stuffed the pearls into it quickly, and released the pressure. The slot closed up, and in spite of his anxiety Mannering was intrigued by its neatness. The cunningness of that hiding-place was increased by the fact that no one could have seen that the desk was anything but solid wood unless they knew of the button-control.

He had little time for thinking, however.

The other seemed to have forgotten him, and hurried across the room, pulled open the door of a small Chubb safe, bundled the packet of notes which he had brought back into it, and slammed the door to.

"Get into that chair," he snapped. "You're after a job, understand? The police . . ."

Mannering nodded, and dropped into the seat that was opposite Grayson. The latter slipped into his chair, spread his hands on the desk in front of him, and smiled thinly. Mannering told himself that he had never seen a man act so swiftly and so surely. His opinion of the receiver went up by leaps and bounds.

"So you've been waiting for me, eh?" said Grayson, his deep voice filling the office. "Well, I don't know if I've got anything in your line, mate. I . . . Come in,"

He broke off, looking towards the door. It opened, after the

merest apology of a knock, and Sergeant Tanker Tring moved into the room, a gloomy smile on his face, his hands deep in his pockets.

"Well ?" Grayson looked puzzled, and Mannering clenched his teeth.

"Don't waste my time like that," protested Tanker, a little forlornly. "You know me, Mr Grayson. . . ."

Grayson's eyes narrowed. And then he smiled. It was beautifully done, and Mannering felt his panic leaving him.

"Tring," he said, "the policeman. I thought I'd seen you before,"

"I'll have to dye my hair red," said Tanker, "and then you'll be sure," He seemed completely at his ease as he sat on the corner of the desk, less than a yard from Mannering. He looked down on that big-muscled man with interest.

Mannering's nerves were stretched to breaking-point. He knew that the slightest slip might give him away, and he was afraid of what would happen if Tanker looked at his eyes too closely. The eyes couldn't be disguised: they were the danger-spot.

The policeman shrugged his shoulders, as though disappointed.

"What's your name ?" he demanded.

Mannering knew that there was only one attitude he could adopt to be in keeping with his appearance, and never in his life had he been so grateful to Mr Karl Seltzer's voice-training.

"What the "ell's that got ter do with you?" he growled.

For a moment his eyes met Tanker's, but there was no gleam of recognition in the policeman's. Tanker grinned, and shrugged his shoulders.

"No offence," he said, "but don't come it, mate," He turned to Grayson, who was leaning back in his chair and smiling. "Sorry to disturb you, Mr Grayson" — there was a wealth of sarcasm in that opening — "but I've got to look round,"

“Look round ?” Grayson’s eyes widened. “I don’t know . . .”

“No one ever does know what I mean,” said Tanker sadly. “Don’t come it, Mr Grayson. Try and think of a reply to the beak — he might listen.”

Grayson kept his temper admirably, or at least he gave the impression that he was doing so.

“I suppose you mean magistrate ?” he said. “If you think there’s any reason for talking like that, Tring . . .”

Tring looked at him admiringly.

“Would you believe it,” he said, “but someone’s suggested that a gentleman like you might be a fence ? Don’t ask me what that is. I know you’ve never heard it before, so I’ll tell you. It’s a receiver of stolen goods.”

For the first time Grayson seemed rattled and a little apprehensive.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” he snapped. “If you’ve anything to ask me, get it over, Tring. I haven’t time to waste,”

Tm going to have a look round,” said Tring simply.

“Not without permission,” snapped Grayson.

Tring swung his legs and grinned.

“You don’t think I’d be silly enough to come without a warrant, do you?” he asked. “Open up, Grayson — or life’s going to turn awkward for you.”

Grayson gave a helpless little laugh.

“There’s no reason why I should make it awkward if you’ve really got a search-warrant,” he said; “but it’s an infernal impudence, Tring.”

“I wouldn’t pull your leg,” said Tanker.

He took the document from his pocket, and pushed it in front of Grayson’s nose. The latter glanced down it, shrugged, and waved his hands expressively.

“All right,” he said. “Go ahead. But let me tell you, you’ll hear

more of this."

Tanker clapped his hands. The door opened quickly, and two of the men whom Mannering had seen in the yard entered. The sergeant told them to get to it, and they started quickly.

Mannering sat in his chair, bewildered, more than a little afraid. He knew that if the slightest thing happened to suggest that he was John Mannering the game would be up, and he dreaded discovery every moment.

All the same he watched the search, fascinated. The policemen inspected every corner, every possible hiding-place. They searched files that were thick with dust, old boxes, the drawers of the desk, and they even prised up two loose floor-boards. Their reward was nothing.

Tanker's good-humour prevailed; probably he had expected to draw a blank.

"That leaves just the safe," he said. "Got the key, Grayson ?"

"It's not locked," said Grayson. "I used it just before you came in."

"Now I wonder why?" asked the policeman thoughtfully.

He slipped off the edge of the desk and went to the safe. The door opened easily, and the bundles of pound-notes — three of them — amounting to twelve hundred pounds, were revealed.

The policeman took them out and tossed them into the air as he walked back to the desk. He sat on it again. . . .

Mannering's heart seemed to turn over. Tanker was sitting within an inch of the button which would reveal the slot-opening in the desk — and the pearls.

The Baron sat watching, on tenterhooks every minute. Each time Tanker moved a fraction of an inch he was afraid that the slot would be opened by the pressure. A little ring of sweat formed on his forehead and at the back of his neck. He was more afraid than he had ever been in his life.

But he contrived to keep his face straight and his hands still. He looked at the bundles of notes, and his expression suggested such covetousness that Tanker, who looked at him for a moment, laughed.

"Never want what isn't yours," he advised jocularly. Then he looked at Grayson, and his expression hardened. "That's a lot of money to have all at once," he said.

Grayson's acting was superb. Not by a flicker of an eye did he reveal the anxiety that he must be feeling about the slot in the desk. There was a smile on his lips as he answered: "I could draw you a cheque for ten times that amount," he said, "and still have a good balance. That's wage-money, Tring."

"You pay big wages," said Tring doubtfully.

Grayson's temper sparked at that.

"That's my business," he snapped. "Those notes are for wages, I tell you. I brought them from the bank less than twenty minutes ago. You can go and inquire if you want to."

Tring shook his head, perfectly unperturbed by the outburst.

"No need," he said. "I saw you go in the bank, and I saw you come out. Why not save trouble, Grayson, and tell me why you wanted this money?"

For a moment it looked as if Grayson would lose his temper completely, but he made a big effort, and controlled it.

"I've told you once what it's for," he said. "I pay my wages every month . . ."

"Dock-labourers don't get paid every month," said Tring.

"Dock-labourers don't run my ships," snapped Grayson.

The policeman looked crestfallen, and Mannering realised that the other had overlooked that possibility.

"H'm," he muttered, "you've got ships in, have you?"

"Three," said Grayson, and his expression said: "And if you don't believe me go and find out for yourself."

Tring nodded, sighed, and tossed the bundles of notes to one of his assistants.

Tut “cm back,” he said.

As he threw them he moved a little, and this time he actually covered the button. Mannering could hardly keep his eyes off the danger-spot, and when Tanker shitted an inch away relief went through him. But it was not long-lived, and in the next moment his fears returned tenfold.

That’s that,” snapped Tring, and there was a glint in his eyes. “Now I’m going to search you, Grayson — *and* your pal.”

Mannering’s eyes narrowed with the shock, but he kept cool. He shifted his chair back, half-rising from it more to hide his own anxiety than anything else.

“Cut that!” he grunted. “You ain’t got no warrant to search me, mister, and I ain’t being searched, see?”

Tring eyed him levelly.

“I’ve a warrant to search this office,” he said, quietly enough, “and you’re in it. You’re a big fellow — but don’t try any tricks, or you’ll spend the night in the lock-up, cooling your heels.”

Mannering glowered, keeping his eyes as narrow as he could, hoping hard that Tring wouldn’t look at them too closely. It was a tense moment. Mannering’s spine was cold, for there was something very threatening about the sergeant.

“Well?” snapped Tring.

“Better let ‘em,” advised Grayson quickly.

Mannering shrugged his shoulders and grunted. For the first time in his life he was searched. He was hard put to it to keep steady, and the seconds dragged like minutes, but there was one thing that cheered him. He knew that he was carrying nothing that might connect him with Mannering, and the only thing in his pockets of interest to Tring was the rubber container in which he had carried the pearls.

There was an ironic twist on his lips as Tring held the bag up and peered into it. An hour before he would have seen one of the things he was desperately anxious to find, and the career of the Baron would have come to an abrupt end. Now . . .

"What's this?" Tring asked, looking at the big man's blackened teeth. "A tooth-brush container?"

Mannering's lips curled savagely.

"Clever, ain't yer?" he muttered.

Tring shrugged, and dropped the bag on to the table, where half a dozen oddments were heaped. Mannering's pockets had been completely emptied, and he had never been more thankful in his life that he had taken another man's advice. Flick Leverson had told him never to carry Brown's stuff in his pockets when he was pretending to be Smith. The philosophical fence's experience was very full.

Tring grunted suddenly, easing the tension.

"Let him have it back," he said. "Now you, Grayson."

The reward was the same after Grayson had submitted — nothing. Tring shrugged his shoulders, but now his dis-appointment was obvious.

"Have you quite finished ?" asked Grayson softly.

Tring nodded.

"Well," said the pink-and-white man, "let me advise you, Tring, to behave a little differently in the future. If you ever come into this office and forget to call me "mister", if you come here pretending that you know I'm crooked, treating me and my visitors as if we were old lags, I'll have you run out of the Force. There's things you can do and things you can't. You've overstepped the mark. Don't do it again."

There was a complete silence in the room for a moment, while Sergeant Tring's face turned a deep red.

"All right," he said at last, and beckoned to his men. "But I'll

bear that little speech in mind, Grayson."

Grayson watched the three detectives go out of the room, and on Mannering's face there was a grin of real triumph. But even as the door closed Grayson lifted his hand warningly. Mannering was puzzled, but knew the reason a moment later.

"That's the first time I've ever been insulted like that," boomed Grayson, "and I'm damned if I'm going to take it. Who is Tring, anyhow, the impertinent upstart? I'll see that he wishes he hadn't. . ."

"I'd like to get my 'ands rarnd 'is throat," muttered Mannering, playing up quickly, "the mucky . . ."

He broke off as the door opened suddenly. Sergeant Tring entered the office, looking very apologetic, but grinning a little.

"I left my note-book," he said, picking it up from the desk. "Thanks. Good-bye."

The door closed on him again, and Grayson swore. Mannering went to the window and looked out. Not until the detectives were walking across the yard below did either of them speak.

"That was close," Mannering muttered.

Grayson nodded, but he was smiling.

"They think they're smart, those fellows, but they don't know everything." He tapped the slot in the desk, which was still concealed, and his smile widened. "He was sitting right on it, and didn't think of running the desk over for a button. Policemen . . ."

The fence stopped, with a shrug.

"Anyway, we got away with it. But you'd better not take the cash out with you, in case they're watching. I'll post it. Where shall I send it to?"

Mannering hesitated, half-afraid that there was a catch; but he had to admit the wisdom of the manoeuvre, and he nodded.

"Mayle," he said. "Strand G.P.O."

Grayson nodded, and rubbed his plump hands together, well

satisfied with life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PROFIT AND LOSS

MANNERING KNEW, LATER IN THE DAY, THAT HE HAD MADE a mistake. He had told Grayson to send the money to the Strand post office, and he saw that it would have been wiser to have had it sent to Aldgate, where he could have collected it while in his Mayle disguise without trouble. As it was, he was faced with the need of sending a messenger or braving the journey from Aldgate, where Harry Pearce gave him his disguise, during the daytime, for there was the possibility that Grayson's curiosity would encourage the fence to watch the post office. Mayle, not Mannering, must call there.

He did not fancy sending a messenger to collect twelve hundred pounds. The only thing was to do it himself.

"There's one thing," he told himself, as he regarded his face in the mirror and smiled the villainous smile which the cleverly made false teeth created — teeth which fitted over his real ones like a thin rubber cover, "no one who knows Mannering will want to know me."

Nevertheless he was on tenterhooks the next morning

when he journeyed from Aldgate by bus and walked along the Strand towards the post office. The chance of meeting acquaintances was considerable. Toby Plender might be there, Jimmy Randall frequently visited a fine-art shop near the post office, and a dozen of his friends had business or pleasure in the neighbourhood. It was another test, another thing to make him realise his own limitations.

He was sorely tempted to keep looking about him, to keep a watch for anyone whom he knew, but he resisted the temptation. He slouched along, looking at his feet, relieved to see that he was by no means die worst-clad man in the Strand. In fact, he told

himself, the standard was very low. He grew more confident, but before he entered the office he had a shock.

A big man was walking a few yards in front of him, a man who seemed vaguely familiar. Mannering tried to place him from the back-view, and was irritated because he could not. And then the big man swung round suddenly, and Mannering was face-to-face with him.

For a moment a pair of keen eyes swept him up and down.

Mannering's heart seemed to stop as he recognised his man. It was Superintendent Lynch.

That temptation to speak, to acknowledge the other, almost gave him away. He fought it back. The Superintendent showed no signs of recognition, but was muttering to himself and going through his pockets. He had obviously forgotten some papers, and his sudden turn had been caused by the recollection of them.

Mannering had to force himself to walk past the big man. He did so, and then stopped at the first opportunity to look into a shop-window, and, glancing back, saw the Superintendent making his way majestically towards the Law Courts.

A smile that was only partly humour twisted Mannering's lips as he entered the post-office building. He was beginning to appreciate the perils of his position more. It had seemed a good prospect at first, and the difficulties had appeared to be small. But actually they were immense. It wasn't safe for him to walk about the streets, and every time he connected with Grayson or one of the other crooks and fences he was forced to know in order to dispose of his stolen jewels, the danger would be acute.

Yet it was worth it. Mannering's eyes sparkled as he reached the counter and asked for a letter or parcel addressed to "Mayle".

"Initial?" asked the clerk.

Mannering hesitated, cursing himself. Initial! Why in heaven's name had he forgotten to quote an initial to Grayson ?

He took a chance, making his mind up quickly.

"J," he said, "but I don't think the other man knew it."

The clerk wasn't interested, it seemed. He looked into the "M" pigeon-hole, pulled out the package that Mannering's eager eyes had already seen, and slipped it across the counter. Then he turned away, without a word, before Mannering had taken the packet.

"Surly devil," thought Mannering.

He was interested chiefly in the parcel, however. He knew that there was a possibility that Grayson had double-crossed him, and until he had actually seen the notes he would not be satisfied that he had received full payment. His fingers trembled a little as he undid the string, and he breathed freely again when he found that Grayson was straight.

But by the time Mannering had returned to Aldgate, removed his disguise, taken leave of Harry Pearce, and then made the minor disguise which changed him from Mr Mayle to John Mannering it was approaching two o'clock. He would have to hurry if he were to reach the banks that afternoon.

He was finding the service-flat in Brook Street very useful. At one time he had viewed it as an unnecessary expense, but he was glad now that he had never tried to economise. The place was central, its service enabled him to dispense with a servant, and he could act there with less risk of interference than if he were in an hotel all the time.

He had actually given up his rooms at the Elan, but the proceeds from the Overndon pearls would enable him to take them again. It was necessary still to show a good front. He had to *look* rich. Whatever economies he practised must not be at the cost of appearances, unless the situation was desperate.

But he was living at the rate of five thousand a year, and he would have either to cut his expenses or increase his income considerably; so much was certain. He had done well with the

smaller stuff, but the robberies that he was officially helping to investigate would have to become less frequent. He needed something bigger. But there was always the difficulty of selling.

Grayson seemed reliable enough, but Mannering doubted whether the fence would be prepared to buy anything at a higher figure than fifteen hundred pounds, while he had no desire to visit the warehouse too often. The old problem of finding an outlet for his jewels was increasingly difficult. He still had the Rosas, worth ten thousand pounds if he could find the right market.

Mannering smiled as he remembered the little duel with Septimus Lee, alias Levy Schmidt, and not for the first time wondered whether the clever Jew had forgotten him, or whether he was still suspect. He was sure that Lee was keeping a very careful watch for the Rosa pearls. If they were sold through any normal channel — normal, that was, from the point of view of the fence — Lee would learn of it.

Meanwhile Mannering was sitting pretty with the Rosas in his possession, but with a bank-balance which, until this twelve hundred pounds had come along, had been perilously low; but now he had enough to satisfy him for a while.

He separated the notes into three packets of four hundred each. Then he took his paying-in books and made the necessary entries. This finished, he glanced at his watch, to find that it was twenty minutes to three. He would have to taxi from one bank to the other if he was to get to them before they closed, and he had no desire to keep the cash in the flat all night.

Then he had a shock: without the slightest warning the door of the flat opened.

Mannering saw it, and went pale. He moved his hands towards the bundles of notes, but he knew that it was useless to try to conceal them; he would be seen. For a split second that seemed like an eternity he waited.

Then he saw who it was, and he laughed. It was the only thing to do.

Lorna Fauntley stood in the doorway, smiling at him, but looking puzzled.

“Greeted with loud hurrahs — or am I ?” she mocked, as she advanced towards him.

Mannering stood up quickly, and took her hand; his eyes were dancing.

“Is that the way you enter a bachelor’s apartment?” he retorted.

“I tried the door, it opened, so I came in,” said Lorna, dropping into a chair. “If you want to keep your guilty secrets from prying eyes you should lock your rooms, John.”

“It’s not worth the risk of missing you,” Mannering riposted.

He had not seen Lorna so frequently of late. The advent of the Wagnalls and Gerry Long and the reopening of his friendship with Lady Mary and Colonel George Belton had occupied him, and Lorna had spent a great deal of time painting. Too much time, he told himself as he looked at her.

He regarded her for several minutes, thoughtfully and without speaking. She returned his gaze, but the smile on her lips was not wholly sincere. She looked tired. Her eyes lacked the lustre they had possessed; that turbulent spirit that had at first intrigued and later enamoured him was subdued. He hardly knew why, but he told himself that she was worried.

“I’m looking a wreck,” said Lorna suddenly.

The disconcerting habit she had of saying the obvious and saying it bluntly was still in her, and Mannering laughed.

“You look as though art has been too hard a master,” he said. “You’re working too much, my dear. You mustn’t.”

Lorna laughed and shook her head; there was a hardness in the sound which made Mannering wary.

“I must,” she said; “but don’t worry about me, John.”

Mannering’s lips curved as he offered her a cigarette and suggested tea. She nodded, and she watched him make it, smiling a little, but without the mischievousness that had characterised her in the early days of their friendship.

“Why must you?” he asked, as he handed her a cup and passed sugar and cream.

The sudden return to the topic seemed to take her off her balance. Her face was very sober as she stirred her tea.

“Why do most people work?” she demanded, almost defiantly.

And then, to Mannering’s complete astonishment, tears welled up in her eyes, and she covered her face in her hands.

“Oh, my dear,” said Mannering. He stepped to her side and gripped her shoulders gently. She said nothing, but after a moment she smiled. There was something pitiful, something tragic, in that smile, and the need for knowing why seemed to Mannering the most urgent thing in the world.

“If there’s anything I can do,” said Mannering very quietly, “you’ve only to say it, Lorna. No need for questions and answers. Just say the word.”

She pressed his fingers, and smiled wanly.

They had finished tea, but for some minutes neither of them had spoken. Mannering was completely at a loss. If there was one thing he had never anticipated this was it. Lorna was essentially strong-willed. He had never seen her show emotion. She had always covered it with that sometimes cynical, sometimes mocking, sometimes uncertain veneer. And now this, taking him completely by surprise.

“There isn’t,” she said. “I’ve made a fool of myself, John, and that’s all there is to it.”

“And so we have to forget it?” suggested Mannering.

Lorna nodded. Mannering smiled, but there was a depth of

understanding in his eyes.

"My dear," he said, "you're talking nonsense. There was a time when we started to talk of . . ."

"Marriage?" said Lorna as he hesitated, and the word was a whisper.

"Marriage," he said soberly. "I've never mentioned it, because it was an understanding that we shouldn't. But if we were married you would want me to help. Why don't you now?"

She forced a smile to her lips.

"There's no reason why I should," she said.

"There's every reason," said Mannering, and his voice was very low.

Lorna shrugged her shoulders. She looked very forlorn, very tired — and very lovely.

"It's a very old business," she said. "I mean, it's ageless. I'm in need of money. That's all."

She spoke listlessly, as though she was speaking without interest. When she stopped she continued to look past Mannering towards the wall.

He was glad that she did.

The complete astonishment which filled him as he heard the word "money" revealed itself on his face. It was gone in a flash, but it had been there, and he felt winded. Lorna, daughter of Lord Fauntley, who had boasted that he was among the ten richest men in England, wanted *money*.

There was something absurd about it, but Mannering conquered a temptation to laugh. He swallowed hard, and then said quietly: "How much?"

The blankness disappeared from Lorna's eyes as he spoke. She laughed, and for the first time since she entered the flat she sounded normal, natural.

"That's just the one question I'd expect you to ask," she said.

And the expression in her eyes made him flush. His voice was level enough, however, and held a hint of laughter.

"It's the only pertinent one," he said.

Lorna looked at him very straightly.

"I despise myself," she said, very clearly and very slowly, "because it's the one thing I shouldn't say. But I do need money, John. A thousand pounds, if I can get it. Quickly."

She stopped, and the silence could almost be felt, broken only by her heavy breathing.

Mannering's mind was moving rapidly. The single fact registered that she needed the money — one thousand pounds. It wasn't as large a sum as it sounded; there had been times when he would have laughed at it.

He was tempted to ask questions, but he knew that that was the one thing which he must not do. But the thing tormented him. Why did she need it? Why couldn't she get it from her father if she did want it!

The answer to the second question was obvious, he told himself. Fauntley would ask *why*. She couldn't tell him; so the reason for her need was . . .

Blackmail came to his mind. It came and went quickly. He preferred not to think about it, but he could see that the worry and anxiety in her face spoke of something like that. Blackmail!

He forced his thoughts down; the silence was growing too strained.

"That's all right," he said. "When exactly do you need it?"

His words came easily, even if the thoughts which had flashed through his mind after her words had seemed timeless. He was looking at her, and Lorna smiled.

"You're very much true to type, John," she said, and then stood up quickly and reached for her gloves. "But we've both been talking nonsense. I don't need die money, and you're an idiot for

thinking that I do. Shall we dine to-night ?"

Mannering smiled, and his fingers closed round her wrists.

"Brave, but not so convincing," he said very gently. "Try to be honest, my dear, with yourself — and me. It may help us both. Meanwhile . . ."

Her lips trembled, and her eyes were suspiciously bright.

"I shouldn't have come," she said.

"You know you should, for it made you talk. We can't do much for each other, Lorna. You know why. I don't. But when I *can* help I'm waiting and willing."

The tears came into her eyes again. Mannering felt the pressure of her slim body against his. His arms tightened round her shoulders. He looked down on that dark, luxurious hair, and. he felt her sobbing. With his right hand he smoothed her head, and he kept very still.

The smile on his lips was beyond understanding.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE QUEEN'S WALK BURGLARY

MANNERING LIT A CIGARETTE, LEANED BACK IN HIS CHAIR, and stared at the ceiling. He was still smiling, but there was a grimness in his smile. The bundles of notes on the desk had disappeared. One small wad was left — two hundred pounds where there had been twelve hundred. It was a difficult situation to smile at, but he had to try.

Lorna had gone. She had gone very quickly, as if afraid that to linger would have been to have lost. Her attitude had puzzled and worried Mannering. She had been unsettled, uncertain, really worried, and as definitely grateful. He had not asked her a single question, and she had volunteered no information. He believed that he was glad, but inwardly he felt a very natural curiosity. Why had she needed the money?

He pushed the question to the back of his mind and moved from his chair. The pass-books which Lee's emissary had once been so anxious to take revealed a sum of nine hundred pounds, which, with the two hundred on the desk, made a total of eleven hundred. It was enough for the moment, but it meant that he was living hand-to-mouth. He was back where he had been a few days ago.

For the hundredth time he wondered how he could dispose of the Rosa pearls, and for the hundredth time he determined to let them wait for a while; they were too warm yet. The next problem, then, was to find another likely victim, and a haul he could turn into cash quickly.

Mannering grimaced. By now he almost disliked the cold-bloodedness of his life of crime. It was as distasteful in some ways as it was exciting in others. But he would go on now until he had made enough to retire on; so much was certain. He tried to fix a figure, but he realised the uselessness of it. His expenses in a year's

time might be doubled or trebled — unless, of course, he slipped up on a job and spent a few years in gaol. The prospect, instead of making him hesitate, cheered him. There was a zest in danger that made up for everything else.

He ran through the list of his social engagements for the next two weeks. The only events of note would be the Faundey dinner — Lord Fauntley held an annual affair that outshone all rivals in the matter of celebrities and luxuriousness — and the Ramon Ball. The Fauntley affair was out of it; Mannering was still determined not to make any raid on the peer's strong-room, for the guard would be stronger than ever now.

That left the Ramon Ball.

Carlos Ramon was a South American cattle-owner who had taken by storm that part of London which was primarily money-conscious. The wealth of the Ramons was almost legendary. Carlos himself owned the largest fleet of cattle-boats in South America, and it was said that his herds of cattle rivalled the possessions of the biggest Anglo-American companies. Mannering knew the man slightly, and neither liked nor disliked him.

Carlos Ramon — *Senor* Carlos, Mannering recalled with a smile — had an imposing presence, a brick-red face, handsome after a fashion, with the inevitable moustache, black, greased, and pointed at the ends, and an extremely pretty wife. His wife was Spanish, without the aloofness usually credited to her race; she was, Mannering knew, perilously near a coquette. He knew, too, that Carlotta's beauty and Carlos's money had captured London, and the Ramon Ball, to take place four days after the visit of Lorna Faundey to

Mannering's flat, was a farewell party; the South Americans were returning to their native land, and London was giving them a send-off; or they were bidding London a warm good-bye.

In any case the assembly would be a positive rodeo of the

rich, while most of the women would outdo — or try to outdo — one another with their jewels. The prospect was inviting; there would be hundreds of thousands of pounds" worth there.

Mannering muttered to himself very suddenly as an idea came into his mind.

"You fool!" he said. "Oh, you fool!" And he smiled.

"After going to all that trouble, and suffering as you're doing," said Lorna Fauntley sympathetically, "there are two other costumes almost exactly alike. Poor John!"

"At least I've the imagination not to come as a harlequin," said Mannering, not without point.

Lorna laughed lightly.

She had chosen, a little daringly, to dress as a Spanish dancer, and the daring, in the opinion of a few of the plainer revellers, was due to the fact that the hostess was the obvious choice for that costume. Happily Carlotta Ramon had preferred to be a Fragonard shepherdess, and Lorna was conspicuous — and distinguished; Mannering told himself that she was head-and-shoulders above the others.

Mannering's Charles the Second was triplicated at the New Arts Hall, a fact which Lorna had been deploring. She could not know that Jimmy Randall and Colonel Belton had confided to him their choice of dress, and that he had used that knowledge deliberately.

So he laughed, and scoffed at her.

They danced together before a cavalier claimed his privilege and whirled Lorna away from Mannering. He found himself dancing with a Columbine whose eyes behind her mask suggested nervousness. He put her at her ease, but was glad that she slipped away when the music stopped. He wanted no ties for the moment.

He edged towards an exit, watching the glittering throng that

had gathered together to honour the Ramons, trying to make sure that he was unobserved.

Here and there he recognised someone whom he knew, but for the most part the costumes and the masks contrived to hide the identity of the dancers. The little added zest that invariably accompanied London balls when they were inspired by a foreigner was very much in evidence. The music was a little mad; the costumes were frequendy exotic, the laughter unforced, but helped with wines.

Mannering looked at the great decorated clock in the centre of the ceiling and saw that it was eleven o'clock. That left an hour before the masks would be removed and recognition assured. One hour to work in. It was little enough time.

He slipped towards a cloakroom, staring at the floor as he went. Casual acquaintances passed him without recognising him. His luxuriant wig, rouged cheeks, and high cravat afforded excellent disguise, but he was glad when he reached the privacy of a cubicle without hearing his name uttered. He was flushed a little, and his eyes were gleaming.

From the main hall the strains of the music were floating. He smiled as he slipped out of his costume and revealed that of a harlequin beneath. The latter had been comfortable to wear, and no one at the New Arts Hall knew that he had two costumes; nor if they had known would they have guessed why.

He lit a cigarette, donned his mask, and left the cloakroom, carrying his overcoat and his top-hat over his arm. He reached the first exit from the building, glanced out, saw half a dozen commissionaires and attendants, but felt certain that he could get away unhindered and unrecognised.

That rush of excitement which had possessed him several times before on the start of a haul made his heart thump, and he was more impatient than usual.

Looking neither right nor left, he went from the building. In Queen's Road he beckoned the first passing taxi. He jumped in quickly, shouting an address: "Twenty-seven Crown Street, cabby, and hurry, will you?"

The voice was no more like Mannering's than Mr Mayle's was. The driver shrugged at the unnecessary *haw-haw,* slipped in his clutch, and made quick time. Outside the dark shape of No. 27 Crown Street, W.i, Mannering left the taxi, paid the driver without tipping him extravagantly, and watched the cab disappear into the shadows. Then he turned away.

A strange, almost unnatural silence filled the air.

In the distance the hum of the traffic could be heard, but

Crown Street was quiet and secluded. A long, narrow thoroughfare, it was useless as a short-cut for motor traffic, and at night only the local people and an occasional policeman traversed it.

Mannering looked at his watch, to find that it was twenty minutes past eleven.

"He should be here," he muttered, and from the fact that he was talking aloud realised his own tense excitement. He waited, pricking his ears to catch the wanted sound. It came at last — the heavy tread of the policeman he expected.

Mannering had been in this street three nights in succession. He had discovered the policeman's usual time, and he knew that between eleven-twenty and eleven-fifty only a casual wayfarer would pass by; once the man had gone he could start his job.

He waited beneath the shadows of a spreading tree. The policeman walked on ponderously, without flashing his lantern. Mannering watched him disappear, and then turned towards the tree, a tight smile on his lips.

He had studied the tree and garden beyond, and the narrow passage beyond that. He had climbed the tree on the previous night,

and he knew just how long it would take him to get to the end of the passage. Never again, he told himself, would he start a thing without ample preparation.

The sound of the policeman's footsteps died away. No other came. Mannering climbed the tree quickly, a task made easier by several knots which stood out from the trunk. From the first branch it was a simple matter to jump over the wall into the garden of 27 Crown Street. He landed lightly, and grinned to himself more freely as he went through that garden.

Every taxi-driver who had taken a fare from the neighbourhood of the New Arts Hall would be questioned on the following morning, but no one would suspect that the man who wanted the Crown Street house was connected with a robbery which had taken place at Queen's Walk, a quarter of a mile away from Crown Street. Actually the garden and the passage took him to Queen's Walk in thirty seconds, but the policeman who realised it would have to be smart.

The Walk was lit by occasional street-lamps, and the unwinking side-lights of two stationary cars broke through the darkness. Mannering slipped into the doorway of the first house past the passage and slid a pick-lock into the keyhole.

It was an old-fashioned lock, and gave little trouble, for the picking of a lock came easily now. Mannering pushed the door open as the lock clicked back. He went inside quickly, and closed the door. For a moment he waited in the hall, but no sound came. The house seemed empty.

It was, he believed, and he smiled as he recalled the flash of inspiration that had told him that the house, rather than the ballroom, was the best place at which to make an attempt.

Rented by Carlos Ramon for his six months" sojourn in England, the place was deserted for that night, when Ramon and his wife were at the Ball; the servants, Mannering knew, had

permission to be out. He had prepared for the possibility of meeting a caretaker, but he doubted whether Ramon would have taken that precaution.

Mannering hurried up the stairs, flashing a small electric torch to guide him. His rubber-soled shoes made no sound on the oak landing as he reached it, and his face was covered with the thin blue mark that he used as much to enable him to merge into a general scheme of darkness as for a disguise.

Silently he went along the landing. The first three doors he passed were unlocked, and he went on, but the third refused to open when he turned the handle.

He stopped, and the pick-lock slid into the keyhole. Two or three dexterous twists made the lock click back. He opened the door very quickly and stepped into the room. The moment was near now.

From two windows he could see a dim light streaming, light from the street-lamps. He hurried to the windows, experimented with the blinds, and discovered with relief that they were of the roller type. He lowered them silently, and then looked round quickly.

There was a slight perfume in the air, and he smiled, needing no telling that Carlotta Ramon had dressed in here a few hours before. He flashed his light on to the dressing-table, and from one of the drawers a few small trinkets rewarded him. He opened each drawer quickly and silently, finding a diamond brooch and an emerald pendant which made his eyes glisten. But he had no time to gloat over his success. He closed the drawers, left the dressing-table, and hurried to the walls, where he hoped to find bigger game. He lifted each picture, finding the safe behind a large oil-painting opposite the door.

He worked on it, quickly, patiently, efficiently.

Now that he was actually at work the excitement had cooled. He knew that he was fighting against time, and he could not afford

to fumble. Within ten minutes he must be out of the house, together with the contents of the safe . . .

It clicked open at last.

Mannering's heart leaped. Not since he had robbed Septimus Lee had he known such exhilaration as he felt at that moment. He put his hand inside the safe quickly, and three black cases, unlocked, yielded necklaces. A wad of small denomination notes followed the jewels into his pocket. A pair of diamond ear-rings and pearl solitaires joined the notes. He could not have found a richer plucking, and his smile was wide.

He was chuckling to himself as he slammed the door of the safe and turned round . . .

And then he stared at the figure in the doorway, absolutely dumbfounded. He had heard no sound, had no idea that he was being watched, but the man was there !

And he was holding a gun in his right hand.

Mannering's head seemed to whirl as he waited, as he watched the man advancing towards him. He had been wrong, he knew, and he cursed himself for his madness. He should have allowed himself time to look through the house, to make sure that there was no watchman. He should have made sure from the Ramons, if necessary, whether they kept a man; but it was too late now.

The gunman stepped towards him.

It meant — the end.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A PATCH OF BLOOD

THAT MOMENT WAS VERY VIVID TO JOHN MANNERING.

The approaching man, the gun, the slow, almost stealthy movement, as if the other were expecting an attack, and the thumping of his heart against his ribs, remained in his mind for years.

He stood dead-still, staring.

His passiveness seemed to make the other hesitate. He stopped, two yards away from Mannering, and his gun moved threateningly.

"No funny tricks," he muttered, half to himself. "And now take yer mask off, mister."

Mannering's mind was racing as he tried to find a loophole; but he did not move. The other's voice took on an ugly note.

"If you don't snap it off I'll shoot," he said.

Mannering managed to laugh, little though he was feeling like it. The sound echoed unnaturally through the room, and it sent uncertainty into the other's mind. The short, stumpy fingers tightened round the handle of the gun.

"I've warned you . . ." he started.

Mannering's heart was going more steadily now. He was doing what he wanted, taking the only possible chance by making the other nervous. The man had the gun, and had reckoned that he could instil fear into Mannering with it. Mannering's silence unnerved him. The gun wavered. It was one thing to threaten and another actually to pull the trigger.

"Take your mask off!" The man's voice rose again. "Now, listen to me, my man . . ."

Mannering's right hand moved towards his mask, a gesture of defeat. He fiddled with it for a moment, while the other watched

him closely.

Mannering was judging the distance all the time. Two yards separated them, and he could reach the man if he jumped. It would be touch-and-go whether he succeeded in preventing the gun from going off, but the chance had to be taken. He tensed the muscles of his legs, actually started to take the mask from his face.

"All right," he muttered dully. "You win. . . ."

On the word "win" he jumped!

That split second seemed an eternity. He heard the man shout, saw the gun move up, thudded his fist into that heavy face, felt the jolt, heard the gasp of pain from the other, and heard the roaring of the revolver!

A sheet of flame flashed in front of his eyes, and he felt a furious burning in his shoulder. But the gun was clattering to the floor, the gunman was staggering back bewildered, and Mannering's fist was thudding into his face again. Mannering was hitting regularly, almost automatically. One part of his mind was concentrated on the struggle; the other was working on the next problem — how to escape.

That revolver-shot must have been heard outside. If the place was surrounded, if curious residents or a passing policeman heard it, the odds were heavily against him. In any case speed was the essential factor. He hadn't a moment to lose.

The man was fighting back doggedly all the time. His fist caught Mannering in the stomach. Mannering gasped, and staggered away, guarding himself as best he could. He recovered after a moment, and fought back a fierce rush from his enraged opponent; and then he saw his opportunity. The man had thrown caution to the winds, and for a moment his chin was bare . . .

Mannering put every ounce of his strength into the blow. His fist caught the other's chin, and the man reared upward, then sagged downward with a little moan. Mannering's knuckles were

torn; the pain in his shoulder was almost unbearable. But the man was unconscious, and the chance had been won.

Mannering looked round quickly, and the pencil of light from his torch stabbed through the gloom. He made sure that he had dropped nothing during the scuffle, refastened his blue mask, and then made for the door.

From outside the house came the thudding of footsteps. As he raced down the stairs noiselessly he saw the glare of a bull's-eye lantern through the window-panel of the front door. Beyond, very vaguely, he could see the helmet of a policeman. The front-door knocker banged, reverberating through the hall. Mannering swore under his breath. The only outlet was the back way now, and he had no idea of the lay-out of the house. Once again he had not made sufficient preparations.

He took a chance, racing along a passage by the stairs, flinging open a door that led through a room lined with books, through another short passage and into a kitchen. He rushed to the door of the room, and as he did so he could hear the banging at the front of the house and the echo of angry voices.

The back-door was fast. Mannering drew the bolts, almost feverish with anxiety, and there was sweat on his forehead now. He pulled it open at last. . . .

And then, for a moment, he stopped dead-still, and he told himself that the end had come.

A policeman was climbing over the wall at the back of the house, and already the helmet of a second constable was poking above the brick-work. He had been out-manoeuvred; he had not even thought of this. God, what a fool he was!

But his mind worked quickly. Faced with this new problem, he grew very cool and collected. He waited in the shadows of the kitchen, and slipped his hand into his pocket, round the butt of the gas-pistol he always carried. There was no time for half-measures.

The policeman dropped to the ground, stumbled, picked himself up, and hurried towards the door. The second man followed him quickly. Mannering waited until the first was within two yards of him, and then he stepped out of the shadows.

The policeman's gasp of surprise came clearly, but as quick as a flash he lifted his truncheon. Mannering could see him clearly.

"Better take it quiet," he warned.

Mannering's answer was to level his gun. The man's eyes widened; he dropped back a pace, and his obvious fear made Mannering chuckle to himself. There was a soft hiss of escaping gas, and the policeman uttered a single, strangled cry as the ether took effect, and he slumped down. But the advantage was a brief one, and the second man leaped forward. Mannering had no time to use the gas this time. He clenched his left fist and smashed it into the other's face.

The policeman reeled backward, his hands to his nose.

Mannering waited for nothing more. He raced to the end of the garden, grunting as he saw the garden-seat which rested against the wall, jumped on it, and swung over the top. The drop to the other side was a nasty one, but he managed to keep his feet as he landed, although the jolt to his wounded shoulder was agonising.

He looked both ways quickly.

To the left he could see two men hurrying towards him, and his lips tightened. To the right there was no one in the small alleyway; that avenue of escape was open.

Mannering swung round, with the men from the left swinging after him. The pain in his shoulder was worse now, and his knuckles were sore, but there was desperation in his mind, and one thought only — he must get away, he *must*.

He almost sobbed with relief as he reached the end of the alleyway and found himself in a wide thoroughfare. A taxi was crawling along it near him; he jumped forward, heedless of the

man's startled expression, knowing that he cut a strange figure, and that the men behind him were in sight, shouting at the tops of their voices. But their words were indistinguishable, and Mannering still had a chance.

The taxi stopped.

Mannering knew only one way of making sure that there was no hesitation, no loss of time.

"For heaven's sake," he gasped, "get me to Scotland Yard!"

The magic name of Police Headquarters proved effective. As Mannering swung into the back of the cab the driver let in his clutch, and the taxi swung along the road.

Mannering, breathing hard, looked through the rear-window. He could just see the two men — ordinary passers-by, he assumed, racing towards the cab, but their effort was useless, and a smile curved his lips as he realised it.

Then, as his heart steadied, he looked at his watch. The exhilaration of the chase and the escape dropped away, and a new and equally urgent problem presented itself.

It was ten to twelve. In ten minutes the masks would be off at the Ramon Ball, and he had to be there in time, whatever happened.

He straightened his hair, stuffed his mask into his pocket, dabbed his lacerated knuckles with his handkerchief, and then looked out of the window. The cab would be passing the New Arts Hall in a few moments; he saw that there was just one chance of getting there without alarming the driver.

Mannering chuckled grimly.

Then, forcing himself to use his right arm, despite the pain of the wound, he opened the off-side door of the cab and climbed on to the running-board. It was touch-and-go now. If the driver happened to look round he would raise an alarm, but they were in a side-street, and no one was passing. Mannering took his gas-pistol

from his pocket and tapped the driver's shoulder gently. The man swung round, gaping, and a cry came from his lips, but Mannering touched the trigger before it was repeated. The gas hissed out, a familiar, friendly sound to Mannering, and the driver slumped forward across the wheel. The taxi, out of control, swerved across the road.

Mannering clung on to the cab with his left hand and reached for the brake with his right. He pulled it up with a jolt almost in the centre of the road, blessing his stars that no other car was in sight.

He left it quickly. Its lights were on, and there was no danger of an accident, he knew. Breathing hard, he hurried through a side-street towards a side-entrance of the New Arts Hall. As he entered the building he held his breath, half-running as he went, but luck was with him. The only attendant who saw him was smoking a surreptitious cigarette, and, fearful of discovery, was more concerned with dousing it than with making inquiries.

Mannering's heart was in his mouth as he hurried towards the cloakroom. He dared not throw off his coat, for the blood from the wound in his shoulder would show up plainly against the harlequin costume he had on underneath, but by keeping his head bent he evaded recognition. With a sigh of relief he entered his private cubicle.

Then he looked at his watch again and groaned. Three minutes to twelve. *Three minutes!*

It was almost torture to don the Charles the Second costume, but it had to be done; he daren't take a chance, and he must have an absolute alibi in case of inquiries.

He swung his white silk scarf round his arm and shoulder, covering the wound, and managed to get the coat over it. Then he donned his wig, and a dab of rouge over his cheeks finished the job. He glanced at himself in the mirror for a moment, and the smile of his lips widened. A sense of jubilation returned; no one would

dream of what had happened in the last forty minutes.

The first stroke of twelve was echoing through the building from that gigantic ceiling-clock as Mannering entered the ballroom and merged in with the throng of revellers. As luck would have it he saw Lorna a few yards away, and made towards her.

Jimmy Randall's cheerful voice came to his ears before he reached the woman.

"My dress is more accurate than yours," said that worthy cheerfully. "Warm enough, J. M. ?"

"My dress keeps me cool," grinned Mannering.

He reached Lorna's side as the girl took off her mask. All around people were laughing, partners for the evening were taking stock of their companions. Carlos and Carlotta Ramon were standing on a dais beneath the clock, looking thoroughly pleased with themselves. Mannering wondered what Ramon would look like when he heard the news of the burglary, but that didn't matter. The fact that he was sale was the thing.

"So you've left that girl in red?" said Lorna laughingly.

Mannering chuckled to himself. He needed no further proof of the wisdom of wearing the same costume as Randall and Colonel Belton. Lorna would be ready to swear, if necessary, that she had seen him in the hall all the evening, and he would want no better witness.

"Of course," he said lightly.

And then the lights of that great hall seemed to dim, and there was a mist in front of Mannering's eyes. He heard Lorna's sharp exclamation of alarm, and felt her arm round him, firm and friendly.

"John — John — what is it?"

The room seemed to be swaying. Mannering held on to his companion for dear life, knowing that he would fall if he didn't. He gritted his teeth. Every ounce of self-control that he had went into

one great effort to regain *his balance before* others besides Lorna noticed that anything was wrong. He managed to smile, and found his voice.

"I'm — all — right," he muttered. "A bit hot. Let's get to the side."

Lorna nodded, and gave him her arm. His shoulder was numb now, and he hardly realised the pain in it. But he reached a bar, just off the main hall, and took a whisky-and-soda gratefully. It burned through him with new life, and he forced a smile that did little to ease Lorna's concern.

"I can't see what you look like," she said. "That rouge hides everything. You're sure you're all right?"

Mannering laughed now, feeling that he could carry on.

"A hundred per cent," he assured her.

And then he saw the brilliant crimson sash that swung across Lorna's shoulders. He saw the damp patch on it, and knew that it was blood — his blood. He stared, unable to keep his eyes away.

Lorna saw the red patch on his costume at the same time.

She went very pale, but said nothing as she bent towards him, so that the waiter could not see the shoulder and its ominous patch of blood. Mannering warmed towards her as she smiled.

"We'll get out as soon as we can," she said. "Mother's leaving just after twelve, and so are some of the others. It'll look natural enough. Get back and change, my dear."

Mannering smiled at her in a gratitude he could not have expressed in words. She had asked no questions, revealed no excitement, but only anxiety; he knew that without her he must have been lost.

But this was something he must explain.

"My dear man," said Lorna, a quarter of an hour later, "I'm coming back to your flat with you to patch you up."

“Not at this hour,” muttered Mannering. He was standing by a taxi, one of a hundred drawn up outside the New Arts Hall. The first streams of home-going revellers were crowding the pavements, mostly older folk, but sprinkled here and there with an occasional younger couple. Mannering, in evening-dress, looked no different from the others, but his arm was throbbing badly now, and he was anxious to get away.

“You haven’t half the sense you get credit for,” said Lorna tersely. She beckoned a taxi and gave his Brook Street address. He smiled as he entered the cab, knowing that he could not dissuade her; he wasn’t sure whether he wanted to.

Less than twenty minutes after he was standing in his bathroom stripped to the waist, and Lorna was examining the wound with a keen, almost professional eye. She was cool, and completely unflurried.

“You’re lucky,” she said. “Or I think you are. It’s not touched the bone.”

“It feels as though it’s broken a dozen,” said Mannering ruefully. “It’ll heal all right.”

“You’ll need a doctor, said Lorna quickly.

Mannering turned towards her. There was a smile on his lips and an expression which she could not understand as he answered.

“That’s ruled right out,” he said.

She stared at him for a moment uncertainly. He could see that she was burning to ask questions, but for the moment he could not bring himself to talk of the night’s adventure. He was racking his brains to find a genuine explanation — or at least one to sound genuine. It seemed impossible. She was very shrewd, he knew; and he judged that she would be able to tell whether he was lying. So tor the time being he said nothing.

“So you don’t want to call a doctor,” she said, half to herself, and her eyes were dark, mysterious, probing. “Well — I can just see

the bullet beneath the skin."

Mannering said nothing.

"And it I try to get it out," said Lorna, "it's going to be painful for you and a nasty job for me."

Mannering hesitated.

"I'll manage it myself," he said finally, "really . . ."

Lorna smiled; the shadows went from her eyes as she rested her hand on his arm.

"You're a complete idiot," she said. "Will you grit your teeth? I'll try it."

Mannering nodded. For a moment his fingers closed round her arm in an answering gesture of trust. She spoke quietly, as though afraid of sentiment.

"It's lucky I'm not likely to faint at the sight of blood," she said. "Turn towards the light, my dear . . ."

The next three minutes seemed like days, but Mannering knew that they might have been a great deal worse. Lorna, tight-lipped, probed with a knife at the dark patch she believed to be the bullet. The bullet it was, and very close to the skin. She levered it out, as she would have done a splinter, and then put it on a shelf.

"You'd better get rid of that."

Mannering nodded, and sat down wearily on the side of the bath. He felt weak and very tired. Still very practical, Lorna bandaged the wound, after bathing it, and he was amazed at the comfort now.

"Get to bed," she said quietly. "I'll stay until morning."

Mannering shook his head quickly as she spoke.

"You can't," he said. "It's asking for trouble."

"My folk will think I'm at Chelsea," said Lorna, with a little smile. And then she caught his hands in hers. "John — don't argue, *please.* It's my turn now to help."

Very slowly the smile returned to Mannering's lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

AT HALF-PAST EIGHT NEXT MORNING LORNA FAUNTLEY stirred in her chair and opened her eyes.

She had wrapped a blanket round her on the previous night, after making sure that Mannering was sleeping soundly, and had dozed fitfully during the small hours. Towards morning she had dropped into a deeper sleep, and she was surprised when she saw the time. The momentary bewilderment at her strange surroundings disappeared. She pushed the blanket away, switched on the electric kettle, which she had filled overnight, and hurried into the bathroom. A quick wash refreshed her, and she was smiling as she set the cups on a tray, collected the milk from outside the front door of the flat, and then tiptoed into Mannering's room.

He was still sleeping soundly, and she could tell from the colour of his face that he was not suffering unduly from the wound. She knew that he had a constitution strong enough to stand the strain, and the anxiety she had felt concerning his well-being disappeared.

She smiled very softly as she looked at him.

His face was dark against the pillow, and his features seemed more clearly marked than usual. There was something in him which seemed almost part of her.

She smiled a little bitterly at the thought, and her eyes clouded, but they cleared a moment later as Mannering stirred suddenly and opened his eyes. He blinked up, and there was something absurdly funny about his expression as he saw her. She laughed unrestrainedly at his bewilderment.

Memory of the previous night's affair jumped back into Mannering's mind. He moved up, then flinched as pain streaked through his shoulder.

“Steady,” said Lorna quickly.

He grinned ruefully, and stretched his left hand towards his waistcoat, where he could find cigarettes.

“It’s a rotten bad habit, smoking first-thing in the morning,” said Lorna.

“There are lots of bad habits,” said Mannering, taking a cigarette and lighting it, one-handed. He looked uncertain of himself. “So you *are* still here,” he said at last.

Lorna laughed.

“I’m afraid so,” she said. “If you knew what you looked like, my dear, you’d have a shock. But sit there for a while until I make tea.”

When she re-entered the room five minutes later Mannering had pulled a comb through his hair, and was comparatively wide-awake. His uncertainty had disappeared, and he looked completely in control of himself.

He drank the tea gratefully, before saying much. Then: “I suppose,” he said, looking at her quizzically, that I ought to start some explanation ?”

Lorna shook her head. Her lips tightened, and she smiled with her eyes.

“No,” she said. “You asked no questions the other day. I’m asking none now. I just want to say, John . . .”

She paused. Mannering’s eyes were very soft.

“Be careful, my dear,” she added, and her voice trembled.

Mannering managed to laugh a little.

“I’ll try,” he said.

“And now” — she was serious again, and practical; the moments of sentiment passed quickly with her, he knew — “I’ll have another look at your shoulder, and we’ll get some breakfast. That’s if you can eat . . .”

“It’s time you went,” said Mannering. “It would look nasty,

Lorna, if anything — anyone . . .”

“It’s too early,” said Lorna decisively. “They’ll think I’m at Chelsea, I tell you.”

“Supposing they ring you, and get no answer?”

“That won’t be any change.” She was tugging at the left arm of his pyjama-jacket. “They’re used to getting no answer when I’m at the studio. Am I going to look at your shoulder, or are you going to be awkward ?”

Mannering gave in, knowing that he would have to eventually.

Lorna pronounced the wound satisfactory. There was no bleeding now, and no sign of complications. She dressed it with liberal boracic and lint, bandaged it effectively, and told him to move carefully.

“Gingerly’s the word,” Mannering chuckled, yet more pleased with her concern than he would have admitted. Then a thought flashed through his mind, and his eyes were suddenly hard.

“What happened to the bullet?” he asked.

“In the bathroom still,” said Lorna.

“We’d better get rid of it,” said Mannering. “And — have you seen the morning papers yet?”

Lorna shook her head slowly.

There were some outside,” she said. “Were they yours?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I’ll get ‘em in a moment.”

Lorna smiled obscurely and went out. Mannering began to dress, slowly and awkwardly. Without worrying about a collar or tie, he went into the living-room, sniffed at the odour of grilled bacon, smiled at Lorna for a moment, and then went to the door, with his object half forgotten and his mind filled with the memory of her flushed face.

The papers were folded, just outside, and he took them in and opened them quickly, half-expecting what he saw.

The first words seemed to leap out of the print towards him:

ARMED BURGLAR AT MILLIONAIRE'S HOUSE
MR. CARLOS RAMON ROBBED
THE BARON AGAIN?

The newsprint, written sensationally, was no more than a re-hash of the affair at Queen's Walk. There were points on which he could have enlightened the journalist who had starred the story, but the one thing for which he was looking was granted him.

The man with whom he had fought and the policeman on whom he had used the gas-pistol were not seriously hurt.

Mannering felt relieved and almost light-hearted. He had hardly realised the depth of his anxiety at the possibility that the guard had been badly injured. Thoughtfully he looked at his knuckles, still grazed and broken. Then, his lips curved a little, he went back to the living-room.

Lorna was serving breakfast. She had found her way about the flat easily and quickly, and his eyes were gleaming as he went to her.

"You've located the larder," he said, standing in front of her. She looked very cool and very capable.

"There was an egg there which should have been thrown out three months ago," said Lorna, "so it wasn't difficult. Tea or coffee? I'd rather have tea."

"So would I," said Mannering.

He left the papers, front-pages uppermost, on the break-fast-table, and then went into his room. When he reappeared she was reading the story of the burglary. The expression on her lace seemed to defy him, although he hardly knew what to expect. The one thing he did know was that she must learn the truth now — all of it.

"Well ?" he said.

He was paler than usual as the word came out, and it took all his self-control to face her. He had never before seriously considered the possibility of Lorna knowing how he was living. The two separate people, John Mannering and the Baron, had seemed very real to him. He had appeared to think differently, according to which guise he was in. It seemed absurd now to realise that they were one and the same, and that Mannering, the John Mannering part of him, would be judged on the activities of the Baron. That moment, staring at her, he had a feeling of unreality, yet a feeling of great strain, as though everything depended on her reaction.

"Well ?" he said again.

Lorna said: *"I know, my dear.* I've known for some time."

It couldn't be true.

That sense of unreality was ten times stronger in Mannering at her words. Neither of them had moved, neither of them had spoken, since that single sentence had come from Lorna, spoken very quietly, and with a lurking humour in her dark eyes.

She *knew.*

Mannering brushed his hand through his hair, and automatically sought in his pockets for cigarettes. Not until the first streamer of smoke went towards the ceiling did he speak, and then his voice was harsh and unnatural.

"What are you saying?" he asked. "Trying to make it easier for me? You *couldn't* have known."

Her smile was still deep — mysterious almost.

"Well, I was fairly sure, John. And I'm not trying to make it easier for you, any more than for myself." She broke off, turning away. "But the breakfast's getting cold."

"Let it," said Mannering. He took a step towards her, and his left hand closed on her shoulder. "It's time we stopped being mysterious. It's time we talked — both of us."

"Is it?" she temporised.

Mannering drew a deep breath. His grip on her shoulder tightened until it hurt, but she gave no sign.

"Lorna," he said, and his voice quivered. "*Please!*"

She seemed to draw herself up, and he knew that she was making a big effort. She forced herself to speak at last, and she was smiling a little.

"I was almost sure," she said, "after the robbery at the strong-room. That night, after I thought it over, I told myself you fitted into the man with the mackintosh, and that if the man had been what he seemed to be he wouldn't have worried about taking the cases with my own jewels in. Obviously the man would have taken them."

"But why obviously?"

"Because the cases were out of their usual positions, I realised that when Dad examined all the safes."

Mannering smiled a little.

"It was a temptation," he said.

"Not a big one, I think. That made me nearly sure of you. And then, John, there was the Kenton brooch; you took it all almost too calmly, as though you were laughing up your sleeve about it. Oh, there were a dozen little things that suggested it. And then there was the other afternoon" — her expression changed now, and he saw that she was thinking of something unpleasant, although he had no idea what it was — "when you handed over a thousand pounds in notes. It was unusual, to say the least. There was no reason why you should have had money like that at the flat . . ."

"I might have been to the races."

"There were none near London, and in any case you hadn't had time to get back from them. It wasn't three o'clock when I came."

"But still I don't see," said Mannering, a little helplessly, "how

that could have made you think I was — a . . .”

The word “thief was on his lips, but she broke in quickly, before he uttered it.

“You were the Baron. I know. It wasn’t any single fact that made me think so. It was the combination of circumstances. And when I read about the burglary last night” — she motioned to the paper as she went on — “I realised that I’d known it was you all along.”

“Yet you stayed here last night?”

“I think I was more — amused — than anything else,” said Lorna very softly. “It *is* funny, John. You’ve a reputation for immense riches. Lucky Mannering, the man who never loses . . .”

“I’ve never heard that one,” said Mannering, a little ruefully, and with a sudden light-heartedness.

“It’s quite a general one,” she said. “And I can see how cleverly you’ve created the impression, my dear. It’s almost fool proof. Even Dad has no idea . . .”

“But you knew?”

Lorna nodded, and there was an expression in her eyes which tormented him.

“I know *you*,” she said very quietly. She laughed suddenly, and released her hand from his. And the breakfast,” she murmured.

“Damn the breakfast!” said Mannering. There’s something else you wanted to say, but which you’ve kept back. What is it?”

Lorna’s smiled disappeared as he stared into her eyes. The anxiety he had seen in her eyes before returned. Her lips parted a little, and she looked — *afraid.* It was the only suitable word he could find.

“Isn’t there?” he persisted, very quietly.

Lorna nodded slowly. She tried to speak, but the words would not come. Mannering’s mind was in a whirl as he waited. For the life of him he could understand nothing, could conceive of no

reason for this sudden change in her manner. Yet he knew that she had been worried months ago. That time when they had talked of marriage — and had postponed it at her wish — came very vividly to him. The same something that had forced her to ask him to forget it was worrying her now, and was in some way connected with her need for money a few days before.

"Take your time," he said.

"It's so difficult," began Lorna. . . .

And then someone tapped on the front-door.

The sound seemed to echo through the flat like a revolver-shot. The colour drained from Lorna's face, and Mannering paled. Instinctively they looked towards the papers, with their glaring headlines, and the same fear was in each mind.

Mannering broke the tense silence as the knock came again more imperatively.

"I'll go," he said. "Keep out of sight."

Lorna nodded, and turned away. Walking with his right arm stiff at his side, Mannering went to the door. His colour had returned, and he was laughing at himself. The knock might be from any casual caller — from a tradesman, from a friend. . . .

He opened the door, convinced that his fears were groundless; and the next moment he was facing the sprucely dressed Detective-Inspector Bristow!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BRISTOW MAKES A DISCOVERY

MANNERING FELT THE SHOCK RUN THROUGH HIM, AND HE believed he had betrayed himself. He could not repress the fear that came back, while he wondered whether it was possible that this call had nothing to do with the burglary. He told himself that it wasn't, and felt the blood drain from his cheeks. There was a sudden change of expression on Bristow's face, which had been creased in a pleasant enough smile.

Then Mannering sneezed.

He was used to the need for quick action, and he knew that suspicion would be sown in Bristow's mind unless he explained the sudden change of expression. So the sneeze came quickly, and seemed natural. He had recovered by the time he looked up, and grinned an apology.

"Sorry, Inspector, sorry. That's not much of a greeting."

Bristow smiled, and offered his hand. Mannering was forced to respond. He felt the muscles of his shoulder tearing as he gripped the other's hand, and he kept back a wince of pain. But if that was all there was to worry him he was safe enough.

Bristow stepped into the first room, making no immediate comment. Mannering felt completely at a loss, but he motioned to a chair, and pushed a box of cigarettes towards the detective.

Bristow took one with a nod, and lit it

"Thanks," he said. Then he smiled a little, and half shrugged his shoulders. "Can you guess why I've come ?" he asked.

"I can't," confessed Mannering, sitting down at the table. He realised suddenly that it was laid for two, and that the detective would be bound to notice it, but he couldn't worry about that now. "Unless it's this . . ."

He tapped a paper lying front-page upward on the table, next

to Lorna's knife and fork.

Bristow nodded, and his expression was grim. Mannering streamed smoke towards the ceiling, trying to look unconcerned, and wondering whether he succeeded. The suspense of this meeting was getting unbearable, but Bristow was apparently waiting for him to speak again. He made an effort.

"You think it's another Baron job ?"

"Not much doubt about it," said Bristow. He crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, looking at Mannering thoughtfully. Mannering was on edge; at any moment the policeman would see that second place at the table, a thought he could not get out of his mind. It affected Lorna, and Mannering meant to keep her name out of anything that might transpire — away from Bristow too, if it could be managed.

"Yes," went on the policeman. "The blue mask was reported . . ."

"Blue mask?" Mannering frowned, and thought uncomfortably that the mask was within three yards of Bristow. "I don't remember that . . ."

"I don't think I ever mentioned it," said Bristow. "One of the regulars who admitted teaching the Baron spoke of the blue mask. But that's by the way. It's one of his jobs all right, because ether gas was used, and" — Bristow was very grim as he went on — "I've had a dose of that from the gentleman. That was the only time I met him face-to-face."

Mannering's fears collapsed like a pricked balloon, and in their place came real exhilaration. The sudden laughter in his eyes looked like eagerness as he leaned forward.

"You've actually met him and never told me? You're a close dog, Bristow!"

Bristow grunted, hardly knowing whether to be pleased or offended. He decided on the former.

“I wouldn’t recognise him again,” he said, looking absently round the room. “But that’s by the way, too. I came along” — he laughed a little and coloured — “because I thought a chat with you would do me good, Mannering. The A.C. will be short-tempered again, and I thought . . .”

Bristow stopped, and the pleasant expression went from his face. In that moment Mannering’s fears returned, only to lose themselves in anxiety for Lorna. That second place . . .

But the detective’s voice was very hard, and a warning that something had gone wrong ticked through Mannering’s mind.

“You’ve read about the business, of course?”

Mannering tried to assume that the other was evading the matter of the two places at the table. He nodded, and wished Bristow would stop looking. For the detective was still staring at the one spot, and there was an expression on his face that puzzled the cracksman.

“He was surprised by a watchman, wasn’t he?” he asked with a big effort. “There was some shooting . . .”

“There was *one* shot,” said Detective-Inspector Bristow in a curiously stilted voice. “It was from a Webley thirty-two, Mannering, and we can’t find the bullet. The obvious solution to that little problem is that it lodged in the Baron.”

“Yes,” said Mannering, and his mouth was dry. Bristow was dangerously near the truth now.

“So we think,” said Bristow.

He was still staring at the table. Mannering felt that he must make some comment, or some move, that would cause the detective to shift his gaze. Bristow wasn’t being discreet. He needn’t make it so pointed that he’d *seen* the two places.

Of course, thought Mannering, I’m all on edge, or I probably wouldn’t have noticed anything. But he is staring, there’s no doubt about it. *Why?*

He moved in his chair abruptly, and at last Bristow's gaze shifted. Mannering, jerking his shoulder suddenly, winced with pain, and started to move his left hand towards the wound. He stopped quickly, but Bristow saw it.

"Hurt yourself?" asked the Inspector. His voice seemed a thousand miles away, as though he was in a world of his own.

"Slipped last night at the Ramon Ball," said Mannering, with a short laugh. He was very wary, very much afraid. It almost seemed that Bristow *knew* something; the man was getting at him.

"At the Ramon Ball, eh ?" said Bristow. He still seemed a long way off, and his expression was certainly strained, almost incredulous. "Er — it wasn't *that* which hurt you, was it?"

"That?" Mannering echoed the word, and turned round.

And then the colour drained from his face. He realised now that Bristow had not been looking at the second place at the table after all. He had been looking at the bullet, which was lying next to the morning paper!

"It looks like a Webley three-two," said Bristow, like a man in a dream. "Let me see it, Mannering . . ."

The door of the bedroom was not quite closed, and Lorna Faundey could see the spruce figure of Bristow as he sat opposite Mannering. She was glad that she had seen the detective before and could recognise him, for it enabled her to judge the position at a glance.

She could estimate the peril of that visit.

Mannering was not at his best. He had suffered considerably from loss of blood, and although his recovery had been speedy, and he had shown little sign of his overnight ordeal, the fact remained that he was less likely to be able to outwit the detective than if he had been uninjured. For a few moments Lorna felt really afraid. She knew nothing of the co-operation between Mannering and the police, and she could conceive of no reason for the early-morning

visit, excepting a connection with the burglary at the Ramons; house. Her heart was beating as she stared tensely through the narrow opening of the door.

Alter a few seconds she breathed more easily. She could see that Bristow was friendly, and that Mannering was not perturbed. The conversation between the two men came to her ears. She realised for the first time that Mannering had been helping the detective, and the realisation made her eyes dance. It was a situation that Mannering would use to perfection, and that few other men would have dared to try.

Satisfied that there was no need for alarm, she turned back into the bedroom. She looked rather sad and rather weary for a moment, very much as she had looked just before Bristow had entered the flat. She thought, with a wry smile, that Mannering would have known the truth — the worst — if the detective had delayed the visit for another five minutes.

Did she want him to know?

Until that morning she had not. But now she felt that it would be wiser if he did. He would understand, she believed; he was remarkable for his power of understanding. And he would say nothing, and make no protest against things as they were. He would wait

Wait. . .

She felt that she had been waiting for ever, instead of for five years. She felt, as she had a few days before, when she had taken the money from Mannering, and as she had felt when she had persuaded Lady Kenton to buy that picture for three hundred pounds, that she would know nothing of happiness. Just now and again, with Mannering, she had forgotten the truth, but memory came back all too swiftly; and if memory failed there was fact.

She shivered a little, and went back to the door.

What she saw now made her eyes widen in alarm, and filled

her with sudden dread. Her body went rigid.

Bristow was staring towards the table. He was speaking in a hard, dry voice, which had little or no friendliness in it Of course, it was possible that he had realised that there was someone else in the flat, and that he had drawn his own — and the wrong — conclusions. There were men who would have looked askance at another who had been caught out in an *affaire.* Many men, in fact.

But she doubted whether Bristow would be affected by that.

Then she looked at the table, and her heart seemed to stop. She heard Bristow's voice, stiff and far away.

"It looks like a Webley three-two. Let me see it, Mannering."

And she knew that it was the bullet. She remembered that John had asked for it, and that she had brought it from the bathroom, intending to give it to him. And then she had seen the papers, which he had placed so that she would have to see the headlines, and she had put the tell-tale bullet down, forgetting it, thinking only of herself and Mannering, an association which she knew might end abruptly one day, or else which would go on and on, if their patience was everlasting.

And the bullet was on the table.

Her mind worked quickly. She saw Bristow stand up, saw his very jerky movements as he took the bullet and examined it. She saw Mannering's expression too, and she realised that Mannering knew that he was caught

He *was* caught. The police would be able to test that bullet, and prove that it had come from the revolver of the man who had been guarding the Ramon house on the previous night. That and the bullet-wound in Mannering's shoulder would be all the proof that the police would need to make their case sound.

The doors of prison seemed to be closing round John Mannering at that moment. Lorna Fauntley hardly knew how to think. But there must be something she could do — there must be

some way out. . . .

Her eyes narrowed suddenly as an idea came.

There was a way, difficult, perhaps, dangerous enough to implicate her as well as Mannering if it tailed. But if it succeeded both of them would be sale, and she was prepared to take the risk; it did not even make her stop to think.

The whole affair rested on that bullet. It was concrete evidence. It could be shown in court and could be matched up with the revolver, the turning-point of the evidence against Mannering. If there was no bullet, she reasoned, there was no evidence. Bristow could think what he liked, but thinking was no use in a court of law. She could swear that Mannering had been with her at the New Arts Hall from nine o'clock until half-past twelve, and others would support her, believing it to be the truth; the papers recorded the time of the crime as half-past eleven, and the alibi would be sufficient; but it would be useless in the face of that bullet. So it must go.

Very suddenly, and with a smile on her face that baffled Mannering and puzzled Bristow, she opened the door of the bedroom and entered the living-room.

Mannering paled. Bristow looked round in surprise.

Lorna stopped, as if startled to find two men instead of one. Just for a moment she looked alarmed, and Mannering was forced to admire her self-control. Then her smile returned, and she looked at Bristow.

"I didn't know we had company," she said. "Has John suggested tea, or don't you believe in two breakfasts ?"

Bristow could not think of anything to say. His mind had been jerked away from contemplation of the bullet between his fingers, and he hardly realised that it was still there as he stared at Lorna.

"Two breakfasts?"

Lorna laughed lightly. Mannering, for all his admiration of her

self-possession, could not for the life of him understand what she was driving at. But he knew she *was* playing with an idea. She looked at him once, quickly, but with a wealth of meaning. The helplessness that had surged through him when Bristow had seen the bullet and picked it from the table disappeared. There was a chance, faint perhaps, but definitely there. And Lorna was playing her hand confidently. If anyone could work the miracle she could. He felt his pulse quicken.

"I assume you've eaten once," said Lorna, still smiling. She seemed blissfully unaware of the tension in the air, and looked at Bristow, who hesitated for a moment. Mannering caught his eye, and flashed an appeal to the policeman. He realised that Lorna wanted him to back her up; she wanted him to persuade Bristow not to broach the subject while she was there. It was expecting a great deal, but there was a faint possibility that Bristow could be induced to drop it, if only for a short while, and thus save Mannering from being unmasked in front of a woman.

Bristow fingered his moustache awkwardly. He read the appeal, and nodded slowly, while Lorna took another cup and saucer from a small cupboard, asked him how much sugar and whether any milk. He answered automatically. The seconds seemed to drag like hours.

Lorna filled three cups, and handed one to him, as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Mannering marvelled again at her self-possession, but he was still puzzled. She knew about the bullet, and she must realise the situation, but she was carrying herself superbly. Bristow couldn't know for certain whether she had overheard any of the conversation.

The detective reached for the cup, and then realised that he couldn't take it while the bullet was in his hand. He didn't know that Lorna was gambling on the belief that he would not give up the

evidence he held, and he drew back quickly. But he was a fraction of a second too late. Lorna uttered a little cry of alarm. . . .

Mannering saw that she actually pushed the cup and saucer against the detective's hand; it was the crucial moment, and he almost cried out in suspense. The cup tilted and went over. The tea, scalding hot, poured over Lorna's fingers and over Bristow's.

The detective gasped, and dropped the bullet as the tea stung his flesh. It wasn't until a moment later that he realised that he had been tricked.

Lorna bent down like a flash, and Mannering realised what she was doing. He seemed to be laughing to himself, irrationally, at the cleverness of the ruse. And she was still playing a part, still fighting.

"I'm awfully sorry," she said. "I really should have been more careful. No — I'll pick it up. . . ."

But Bristow was alert now.

"Get up!" he snapped, and his voice was harder than Mannering had ever heard it before.

Lorna stood up, holding the cup and saucer, neither of which had broken; her expression was icy as she eyed the detective. Many a man would have been deceived by her words and her tone.

"I don't quite understand," she said.

Bristow grunted, and his eyes were like agate.

"I understand you now," he said. "This isn't going to be quite the picnic you seem to think, young lady. Where's that bullet?"

"Bullet?" Lorna's tone, the question in her voice, the expression on her face, and the apparent mystification in her eyes were perfect. She stared at Bristow, waiting for him to answer.

The detective swore beneath his breath, nonplussed for a moment.

Mannering was feeling an absurd relief. The reaction tended to make him feel light-headed, but he realised his weakness, and

knew that he must do something to support Lorna without spoiling her ruse. He looked towards the floor at the pool of tea, and then into Bristow's eyes.

"Did you mention a bullet?" he asked, and his voice sounded unnatural, even to himself. "I . . ."

Bristow snapped his fingers with a gesture of more than annoyance. He was bristling with anger, but beneath the anger was common sense and a knowledge of the strength of the powers behind him. He had been outwitted, but only temporarily. The bullet was still in the room, almost certainly in Lorna Fauntley's slim hand.

"Don't try to be funny," he snapped, and his eyes flamed as he looked at Mannering. "There are some things which are out of bounds, Mannering, and that's one of them."

Mannering flushed, but laughed.

"You're beside yourself," he said easily. "You've come here excited, and you don't know what you're saying — or doing."

"Excited!" Bristow blared the word. "Do you mean to tell me that there *wasn't* a bullet?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Mannering. The gleam in his eyes belied the words, but his lips were steady and serious. "Do you, Lorna ?"

The girl shook her head; her eyes were inscrutable.

"He's being abominably rude," she said. "If he's a specimen of the Yard policemen I'm inclined to agree with Lady Kenton."

Mannering kept a straight face with difficulty. He knew, Bristow knew, and Lorna knew that unless that bullet were produced Bristow had no kind of a charge against him. The bullet was in Lorna's hand. Bristow daren't try to use force, and he would have to wait until a woman came from the Yard. That would give them half an hour or more to get rid of the bullet effectively. God, what a situation!

Bristow's eyes hardened. He realised that he was being baited in the hope that he would do something foolish. But he was too seasoned an officer to take chances. His voice was harsh.

"So that's how you'd like to make it, is it?" he snapped. "Well, you can't get away with it, Mannering. *You're* the Baron. That bullet will prove it. Now — where's your telephone ?"

Mannering indicated a stand in the corner of the room. There was no object in trying to evade Bristow on that point, but the detective needn't reach the instrument.

A moment later Mannering felt a quick revulsion of feeling, and again the situation swung round.

Bristow dipped his hand into his pocket, and pulled out a gun. There was a grim smile on his face, tinged with triumph.

"Yes, I know it's against regulations," he said, "but it pays to take a chance at times. I took this in case I bumped into the Baron — into *you* — last night. It'll serve its purpose now. Get into the corner — both of you !"

Mannering hesitated. Lorna's eyes widened, and fear tugged at her heart. This was a development neither of them had anticipated.

"I shouldn't take any chances," grunted Bristow. He was hard and implacable, and he seemed to have changed into granite. "If this goes off it'll be because you were resisting me in the execution of my duty. I've nothing to worry about, and you stand to risk *another* bullet."

There was a tense silence as he stopped. Then Mannering uttered a short, high-pitched laugh.

"Let's humour him," he said to Lorna, and he hardly knew how to keep his voice level, for his heart was thumping fast.

Bristow's eyes glinted. He watched the couple move towards the corner, and the glint changed from one of annoyance to satisfaction at Mannering's words. Keeping his gun trained on his prisoners, he reached for the telephone. It was one of the new type,

and he had no difficulty in talking and keeping his captives under his eyes. They were caught. Mannering might have moved and taken a chance, but he would not risk Lorna.

"Scotland Yard," Bristow grunted. There was a pause. Then: "Sergeant Tring? Oh, Tring, come along to Mannering's flat, in Brook Street, with two plain-clothes men and a woman. Yes, a woman. That's all. Don't lose any time."

He replaced the receiver with a flourish.

That just about finished you," he said evenly, and he smiled, more like the old Bill Bristow well known and liked in the East End. "I'll admit you gave me a shock, Mannering, and I'll admit it was luck that I found you, but — we *always* get our man."

Mannering shrugged his shoulders. He contrived to smile, but he felt no humour. The end was coming, quickly, undramatically. His recent burglaries and his successes seemed to lose a great deal of their glitter.

He seemed to picture the crowded court, the judge and jury, the droning voice of the prosecutor. It would be child's play for the Crown. There was hardly a possible line of defence. Even Toby Plender wouldn't be able to do anything, clever though he was.

Mannering felt physically sick.

Bristow seemed to realise it, and naturally felt a malicious pleasure. It rankled deeply that he had been made such a complete fool, and even now he was wondering what Lynch's comment would be.

"It'll be in your favour," he said, "that you didn't try force, Mannering. And it's luck for you that you don't carry firearms."

Mannering shrugged his shoulders again, and Lorna's eyes were very wide. She was gripping Mannering's sound arm, and he could feel her fingers trembling. Neither of them spoke.

"I suppose you wouldn't like to tell me where I'll find the stuff?" suggested Bristow, fingering his moustache. "It would save a

lot of time."

Mannering made a big effort.

"What stuff?" he asked. His voice was remarkably steady, and he surprised even himself.

There was a gleam of admiration in Bristow's eyes.

"You're game," he said grudgingly.

Lorna broke out as the words left the Inspector's lips. Her poise had gone now, and her breast was heaving.

"John — don't let it happen! Take a chance. You can get away; you must, you *must!* You mustn't let them get you. John . . ."

Mannering gripped her arm soothingly; her outburst gave him new strength.

"Steady," he said. "There's no sense in losing your head, my dear. Bristow's got an idea that I'm the Baron, and he won't be satisfied until it's been proved to the contrary. So . . ."

Lorna swallowed hard. She looked up at the man at her side, and saw his face set in a strange smile. He would fight to the last, of course.

There was a fleeting expression of doubt in Bristow's eyes, but it was gone in a flash. He laughed rather harshly, and moved his gun.

"That'll cut no ice when we've found the stuff you took from Ramon's," he said. "*And* the bullet."

"No?" Mannering was very cool. His mind was working at top speed, on one thing and one thing only. The bullet.

How could he get round that substantial piece of evidence? Was there a way out, other than losing the bullet? Must this be the end ?

"No," snapped Bristow.

Mannering bent his head suddenly, until his lips were very close to Lorna's ear. Bristow's gun moved a fraction of an inch threateningly.

"No tricks," he warned.

"Try and slip it in my pocket," whispered Mannering. Don't answer." He straightened up, and grinned at Bristow. "Couldn't we sit down now ?" he demanded.

The detective was bristling with suspicion.

"I've warned you," he said, "and if you try any tricks, Mannering, you'll make acquaintance with another bullet. I've had more than enough of the Baron — a lot more."

"I find him a little too universal myself," smiled Mannering.

As he spoke he moved, and Lorna slipped the bullet from her hand into his pocket. Or almost into it. At the critical moment he moved again, and the little lump of lead dropped to the floor. The *plop* came as Lorna gasped out in consternation. Bristow's eyes glittered, and he made his first mistake.

He darted towards the bullet. Mannering saw him, loosed his left arm, and swung it at the detective with every ounce of strength in his body. Bristow realised the ruse a fraction of a second too late. He saw the clenched fist loom in front of his eyes, and then there came the sickening thud of fist on bone and flesh. Bristow went sprawling, his eyes rolling as he fell.

Lorna seemed petrified; the thing had happened so swiftly. Mannering swung towards the telephone while Bristow was still dropping to the floor. He had dialled his number before Bristow's head dropped back, but he need not have worried, for his man was unconscious.

Mannering was almost frenzied with excitement, and his eyes were gleaming. The wait for the response to his call seemed never-ending. But a voice came at last, a rather sleepy and irritable voice.

"Hallo, there! Yes, yes?"

The Colonel, thought Mannering. And: "Let me speak to Gerry," he said, keeping his voice steady with a great effort. "Yes, Gerry Long; quickly, please."

“A minute,” grunted Colonel Belton at the other end of the wire.

The minute seemed age-long.

Bristow was still stretched out, unconscious. Lorna seemed to break through the stupefaction which had gripped her when she had seen the policeman go down, and her eyes brightened.

“What shall we do with it?” she demanded.

“Lose it, with luck,” snapped Mannering, “If this man keeps me waiting much longer I’ll . . .”

“But why can’t I take it?” Lorna almost cried the words. “I could get to the river, drop it down a drain . . .”

“And have the police pestering you, questioning you and your lather, your mother and . . .”

“But it doesn’t matter. *You’ll* be all right.”

Mannering’s eyes were very warm.

“You’re very dear,” he said. “But I think we can get away with it. . . . Ah! Gerry . . .” He swung round to the telephone, and Gerry Long, cheerful again now, answered quickly.

“H’m-h’m. Want me, Mannering?”

“Come to my flat,” snapped Mannering, “the *back way*. You came once before — remember?”

“Yes.” Long seemed to realise the urgency in the other’s tone. There was crispness in his voice at the other end of the wire.

“Stand in the courtyard,” snapped Mannering, “and catch the thing I’m going to throw out of the window. Then lose it. A drain, or the river, somewhere. And for God’s sake be here inside five minutes — less if you can make it.”

“Right,” said Long, and Mannering heard the click of the receiver.

He swung round towards the girl, and his eyes were dancing with hope. But there was anxiety in his expression, for time was precious.

"I think we'll do it," he muttered. "I wish to heaven you weren't here, my dear, but it'll be best for you to stop now."

Lorna nodded. She did not know why, but she accepted Mannering's assurance without question. But there was one thing worrying her, and she pointed towards Bristow, who was lying at full length, still motionless.

"What about — him?"

Mannering could see the rise and fall of the detective's chest, and he believed that the other would regain consciousness in a few minutes, none the worse for his knock-out, but very bad-tempered and with a stronger dislike of the Baron than ever.

"He'll be all right," he grunted. "The thing is — will Gerry get here first, or Tanker — the policeman? Oh, my dear . . ."

He broke off, white to the lips. There was a thud of heavy feet on the landing outside the front-door of the flat. Mannering's face paled, but his voice was steady.

He held out the bullet to the girl.

"I'll go," he said. "If it's the police get into the bedroom, wait for Gerry, and throw that down when he comes. I'll keep them out — somehow."

But he doubted whether he could. He knew that Sergeant Jacob (Tanker) Tring was a shrewd officer, and would have no hesitation in breaking into every room in the flat when he saw his superior lying unconscious; and if Tring got into the room in time to see Gerry Long outside the game was up.

As he turned the handle of the door he was wishing that he had let Lorna take the bullet out of the flat. She would have had time to get away; the proof would have been missing. But before he had opened the door he knew that he had done the only thing. It lessened the chance of dragging Lorna's name through the mud, and if it was humanly possible that had to be avoided.

He pulled the door open, his face set to greet Tring.

And then he stood very still for a moment, staring at a large, solemn-faced man who was resting a heavy attaché-case on the floor, and who was proffering packets of note-paper and envelopes.

"Would you care to buy . . ." The man's opening words came smoothly.

"I'll make you a gift," said Mannering, recovering from the surprise and acting quickly.

The man's face brightened at the sight of a free half-crown, but darkened as the door was shut in his face abruptly. He pocketed the coin, and walked on to the next flat, shrugging his shoulders and lugging his case, knowing nothing of the alarm he had caused.

Mannering hurried towards Lorna, who was standing by the door. She had known from his words that it had been a false alarm. Quickly he explained, and went to the window anxiously. The alleyway along which Gerry Long would have to come was empty.

And then Mannering's face hardened; this time there was no mistake.

He could just see into Brook Street, for his flat was near a corner, and he saw the police car, which was travelling at a generous forty miles an hour along the road. He recognised the dour face of Tanker Tring next to the driver, and he knew that the game was almost over.

Lorna saw his change of expression, and guessed why. Her eyes clouded, and for the life of her she could not have spoken.

"They'll be here in a moment," Mannering muttered. "I'll give them a minute — no more. Why the hell doesn't Long come?"

The question was useless. They waited and watched tensely, with their ears pricked to catch the slightest sound from the front of the flat. It was a matter of seconds now. Once the police arrived the chance was gone.

And then Mannering saw the thing he wanted most in the world just then. Gerry Long was hurrying along the alleyway and

staring up at the window. The seconds passed like hours, and Mannering felt like a man possessed when the knock thundered on the front-door with the American barely within throwing-distance.

"Answer it," Mannering said to Lorna very grimly.

Lorna moved away, fear clutching at her, a mad unreasoning fear that it was too late to save Mannering now. But Mannering, in that last tense moment, hardly noticed her. He saw that Long was hurrying, and he could see the anxiety on the American's face. Long was in the small courtyard leading from the alley now. Mannering moved to the window, waved, and pressed a finger to his lips. He was trembling like a leaf as tossed the bullet down. Was it in time? . . .

Long waited below with his hands poised. The bullet dropped into them safely, and Mannering felt a tremendous relief. He was through!

And then Lorna's voice came, raised in an agony of fear.

"John, be careful, be careful!"

Mannering swung round as the door was pushed open violently. He saw Bristow, conscious but wild-eyed, outlined in the doorway, and the policeman lunged towards him, cursing. Mannering stood back rigidly, watchfully, his face blank. Bristow saw the open window and guessed the rest. He leaped for the opening and stared out. In the distance he could see Gerry Long's head and shoulders, but the American was too far away now to be recognised. But Bristow wasn't finished. . . .

"I'll get you," he snapped. "Don't make any mistake about that, Mannering."

As he spoke he leaped towards the window.

Mannering knew what the other was going to do. The one chance that remained for Bristow to get the bullet was to catch the man who was running away. The one way to start was through the window; seconds counted, as much for the one man as the other.

Bristow hesitated for the fraction of a second to reconnoitre the position. There was no fire-escape near him, but immediately beneath the window was a Y-shaped drainpipe that offered a slender hold. Had Bristow not been groggy and aware only of the desperate need for catching the man in the alley he might have thought twice about trying to get down that way.

He hardly hesitated, however, and flung one leg over the sill. He rested his loot on the drain-pipe, and then lowered himself. Mannering realised the danger, and cried out in genuine alarm.

"Steady, Bristow — steady!"

And then Bristow slipped. Mannering heard a *crack!* and he knew in a flash that the drain-pipe had broken.

For a sickening moment Mannering thought that the other was over. It was a long drop to the courtyard below, a drop on to solid concrete, and there could be only one end if Bristow went down. Tragedy loomed in front of him. . . .

Then he saw the tips of the detective's fingers on the window-ledge. He was at the window in two strides, and for a moment he forgot the wound in his shoulder; he *had* to. He leaned out and gripped the other's left wrist as Bristow's precarious hold was loosened. Every thought but that o. saving the detective was out of his mind now.

The full weight of Bristow's body was thrown on Mannering's injured shoulder. The pain stabbed through him, agonising, excruciating. For a moment he was afraid that he could not hold on. Sweat covered his forehead, and his teeth gritted against one another. But he hung on, with Bristow dangling below; and slowly he manoeuvred his left hand to the support of his right.

Grunting with pain, conscious only of the one task, he kept his hold. The pain seemed to be running through his whole body now, and he was wet with sweat. Bristow seemed to grow heavier as the seconds dragged by, but he came no higher. Then his wrist slipped

an inch. . . .

Mannering groaned.

He didn't see the door open, or Tanker Tring, with his face set in alarm, in the doorway. Tring gulped — and then he moved rapidly towards the window, taking the situation in at a glance. He leaned out, fastening his hands round Bristow's wrists below Mannering's. Mannering eased his hold, and stumbled back into the room, while Tanker raised his stentorian voice for the other men who had come with him. They were already in the room, but Mannering, leaning against the wall, didn't see them as they hurried across; nor did he see the three of them haul Bristow up, slowly but easily.

Mannering felt like death.

His face was chalk-white. His eyes were closed, his breath was coming unsteadily. Lorna Fauntley, terrified in case the effort to get rid of the bullet had failed, hardly daring to look into the room, forced herself to enter, and saw Mannering.

Concern drove the fear from her eyes. She went forward quickly, and Mannering heard her voice, as if from a long way off.

"It's all right, John — all right . . ."

Then Mannering fainted.

Almost at the same moment the policemen by the window dragged Bristow into the room. Tanker Tring was wondering what in heaven's name had happened, but he concentrated on taking charge of the situation as it was. He found a decanter of whisky and poured a generous portion between Bristow's lips. He grunted as his superior spluttered and coughed, and absent-mindedly tasted the spirits. He'd learn everything soon enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BRISTOW DISLIKES HIS JOB

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR WILLIAM BRISTOW LOOKED MOROSELY at his sergeant, but said nothing. Tring was eaten up with curiosity, but he knew when to ask questions and when to keep silent. He stared idly at the half-empty decanter.

Bristow muttered something inaudible under his breath.

The two detectives who had helped in his rescue had gone back to the Yard, with the woman-detective. Bristow knew that it was useless to look for the bullet now. He didn't feel that he wanted to look for the bullet. He remembered the terrible moment when he had dangled over the window-ledge, and he remembered the relief that had surged through him when Mannering had gripped him. And then, when he had recovered well enough to take charge, he had seen Mannering stretched out on the floor, and he had seen the pool of blood from the wound which had reopened in the Baron's shoulder.

Bristow was a man, as well as a policeman. He knew that he had been saved from death — or at least from severe injuries — by Mannering's efforts, and he could guess how much those efforts had cost the other man. And yet. . .

Mannering was the Baron.

Bristow grunted again. He was a policeman, and a policeman had no right to allow sentiment of any kind to interfere with his duty. He knew that Mannering was the Baron, and that in that flat there was enough to prove it. The bullet might be missing, but the jewels would still be there.

That bitterness he had felt towards Mannering because of the ease with which the other had outwitted him and duped him was gone. It was a straightforward job of being a policeman that remained, but it was the most distasteful one that he had ever

experienced; nevertheless it had to be done.

He got up suddenly and started to speak. Before he had said two words, however, Lorna Fauntley came out of the bedroom. Her face was pale, her tone almost listless.

"He'll have to have a doctor," she said.

Bristow motioned to the telephone. Tanker, not unaware of the woman's beauty, clambered up with rather clumsy courtesy and muttered: "I'll get one along, miss."

Bristow stared at the girl, who eyed him more than a little wearily.

"Well?" she said.

"I don't like it," muttered Bristow, "but it's got to be done. Did he bring a case with him last night?"

Lorna's lip tightened obstinately. Bristow passed a hand across his forehead.

"For heaven's sake don't make it difficult!" he snapped. "It'll be the same in the long run. We're bound to find it."

She hesitated, and then nodded. Her voice was dull.

"All right," she said. "It's in there — the bedroom. He's still unconscious — don't make a noise."

Bristow grunted, and walked heavily towards the room, feeling no satisfaction.

Lorna waited until the door closed behind him. She glanced at Tanker Tring, whose back was towards her, and who was saying "hallo" deliberately and tirelessly into the mouthpiece. If either of them had looked at her at that moment they must have known that something was wrong. But neither of them did. She slipped a key into the lock of the bureau-drawer, opened it quickly and silently, and took the little bundle of pearls that was there, wrapped in cottonwool, with Mannering's blue mask. The Rosa pearls. Mannering had told her of them a few minutes before, and she was making a last effort; even now it might fail.

She slipped the things into the "V" of her dress, and pushed the drawer back. Tring muttered into the telephone for a moment, and replaced it, turning round and seeing the girl learning wearily against the bureau, motionless. He grunted again. Something was certainly wrong, and she'd had a nasty turn, that he knew.

Bristow opened the bedroom door at that moment, and came out.

There was a twisted smiled on his lips as he stared at Lorna, but her face was set. She looked completely beaten and hopeless. Bristow's smile changed slowly to an expression of bewilderment. Surely it wasn't possible that he'd been wrong?

He knew that it wasn't. He *knew* that Mannering and the Baron were one and the same.

But he couldn't prove it! The bullet was gone, and the brown suitcase in the bedroom was filled with the costume of a Charles II beau! There were no jewels!

"Turn this place inside-out," he snapped to Tring.

Tanker shrugged his shoulders, deciding that it was not a moment to speak, and started his job.

Lorna Faundey had never seen the police at work before. She was surprised by the thoroughness of the search. Drawers, pictures, carpets, furniture, everything was moved and turned inside-out, and everything was replaced in its exact position.

But there was nothing there which could interest them, and Lorna's heart was beating fast.

Bristow called enough at last. He looked at the girl, and he was uncertain whether there was triumph in her eyes or whether it was sheer relief. He was inclined to think that it was relief. He shrugged.

"I don't know how he did it," he muttered, half to himself, "but he did." He glared at Tring. "Why the blazes don't you stop staring?" he snapped. "Get out, can't you?"

Tring was saved from the necessity of a retort by the arrival of the doctor. Bristow's last sight of Lorna Fauntley that day was of her hurrying into the bedroom, followed by the portly, grey-haired physician.

Gerry Long was satisfied to do what he was asked and to show no curiosity. He owed Mannering his life, and there was little that he would not do to pay the debt. When, after the affair of the morning — he had dropped the bullet into the Thames at Westminster — he received a telephone-message from Lorna Fauntley, he made no bones about doing what she asked.

It was a simple enough task. He had to go to the New Arts Hall and ask for the attaché-case which had been left in a private cubicle on the previous night. The initials on the case were J. M. The job was accomplished successfully, and Long, still on Lorna's instructions, took it to the Waterloo cloakroom and left it there under the name of James Mitchell. It was not until six months later that he realised that he had taken the Ramon jewels and Mannering's gas-pistol to the station. Gerry Long was to learn a great many things in the next six months, but for the time being he was content to remain in the dark.

At his flat Mannering leaned back on his pillow and smiled at Lorna Fauntley.

The doctor had gone. After the straining it had received the wound was nasty, but it would yield to treatment, and neither of them was worried about it. Lorna was still worried, however, about the possibility of trouble from Bristow, but Mannering doubted whether it would come.

"He didn't like his job after the window episode, my dear. I'll be surprised if we hear anything more from him over this business. But that doesn't mean we can do as we like in future. He's a good fellow, but he'll stick to his job. God," he added, "but it was close !

If you hadn't managed to get the pearls, Lorna, it would have been all up. Tring didn't notice you?"

"No more than Bristow noticed you weren't unconscious," said Lorna, and her smile was bright.

Mannering closed his eyes for a moment, going over the affair in his mind.

He had known that apart from the bullet the only possible source of trouble was the Rosa pearls, and when he had regained consciousness and had seen Lorna alone with him he had told her where to find the key and the pearls. She had done the rest, coolly and capably. The Ramon jewels he had left at the New Arts Hall; the case had been locked, and was safer there than anywhere else. He did not think that Bristow was likely to look for them there.

So he had those gems and the Rosas. They would bring enough to keep him going for several months; if he could sell the Rosas, enough for a year or more. But in future he'd be more careful.

More careful!

He opened his eyes suddenly. A shock that was almost physical ran through him. He had realised, almost without thinking about it, that he had no thought of giving up the game: the idea hadn't occurred to him. . . .

The Baron was still free.

But there was Lorna, he realised, and he smiled at her, speaking slowly of the things he had been tempted to ask many times before, until: "If I drop it," he asked, "will you marry me?"

There was a short, tense silence. Her eyes, dark, sometimes mocking and mysterious, held nothing but deep sorrow.

"But I can't," she said, in a voice which he could hardly hear. "I'd give half my life to, John, but I *can't.*"

As she finished speaking there was an absolute silence in the room for a period that seemed as if it would never end. Then

Mannering stretched out his arms and took her hands in his. There was a soft smile on his lips, and a gleam in his eyes that she had seen so often and loved so much.

He was thinking, as he looked into her face, of the things she had said and done in the last few months — since the day when they had first met and she had appealed to him as "different". He remembered her reputation; he knew that no men had interested her, that Fauntley had despaired of her ever marrying. Then he reminded himself of the hopelessness that had shone from her eyes sometimes, of the fits of depression she had, even though she had managed to lose them when they had been together. He recalled the time when he had discovered that she wanted money badly, yet dared not approach her father.

And now she said, "I'd give half my life to, John, but I *can't."*

It could mean only one thing, he knew, and now he felt that he had suspected it for a long time. He spoke at last, slowly, smiling, and giving her a confidence enough to repress the tears that were so close to the surface.

"So — you're married?"

Lorna nodded, and said nothing. What could she say?

"And you're paying — *him* — money to keep the marriage secret ?"

She nodded again, but spoke this time.

"Yes." Her voice was very low, but he heard every word clearly. "I've been married for a long time. Oh, it seems a century ago! He went away soon afterwards, and we agreed to keep it a secret until he returned . . . God, what a fool I was!"

"Steady," murmured Mannering, and his pressure on her hands increased.

"Thanks," she said, and a smile flashed in her eyes, to disappear swiftly. "I don't know what the past year would have been like without you, John. He came back just after I'd met you.

He wanted money, and he was prepared to keep silent if I gave it to him. So" — she shrugged her shoulders, and her smile was gone now; she looked tragic, he told himself, but more beautiful than he had ever seen her — "I did all I could. That's why I tried to take the Overndon necklace . . ."

Mannering had told himself a few minutes before that he knew all there was to know. Now, as her words came out slowly, they took several seconds to impress themselves on his mind. She had tried to take the Overndon necklace!

"Good God!" he gasped. "At the wedding — so the dummy pearls were *yours!"*

"Yes," she said steadily; her gaze did not move. "I even bought the dummy pearls to match the real ones as near as I could. I'd been with Emma to buy them in the first place, and I knew what they were like. But when I was there my nerves went. I slipped the dummies into Gerry's pocket never dreaming there would be any trouble. . . ."

She broke off, and there was silence for a few minutes, Mannering was trying to get this new fact out of his mind; it was amazing enough, but it didn't matter now. True, it cleared up the mystery of the dummies, but everything other than the fact of Lorna's marriage was unimportant.

"It's all right," he said at last. "Nothing happened that wasn't soon put right. But. . ."

She flung her head back and ran her fingers through her hair.

"The marriage can't be put right," she said. "Oh, I could let it be known; I could get a divorce. But it would break Dad — he's so scared of scandal. Mother too. Somehow I don't think I could find the courage to — to let it come out."

"You'd rather pay him — and have your life a misery," said Mannering, but there was no sting in his words, and his voice strengthened suddenly. "We'll find a way out, my dear. We *must*

find one. A year or two won't matter, while we're waiting; and meanwhile we can work."

Lorna smiled; her eyes held real humour, and he marvelled at the way she could forget the thing that must have made her wish, often enough, that she was dead.

"The Baron can work," she said, and they laughed together.

THE END